



21

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE TWELVE BLOOD SERVANTS





21 Strike the Blood

THE TWELVE BLOOD SERVANTS

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Yukina Himeragi

Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

**Shizuri
Kasugaya
Castiella**

Paladin
Pure and noble knight
of the fiery blade



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Avrora Florestina
Kaleid Blood
The Twelfth
Sleeping Princess



Ki Juranbarada

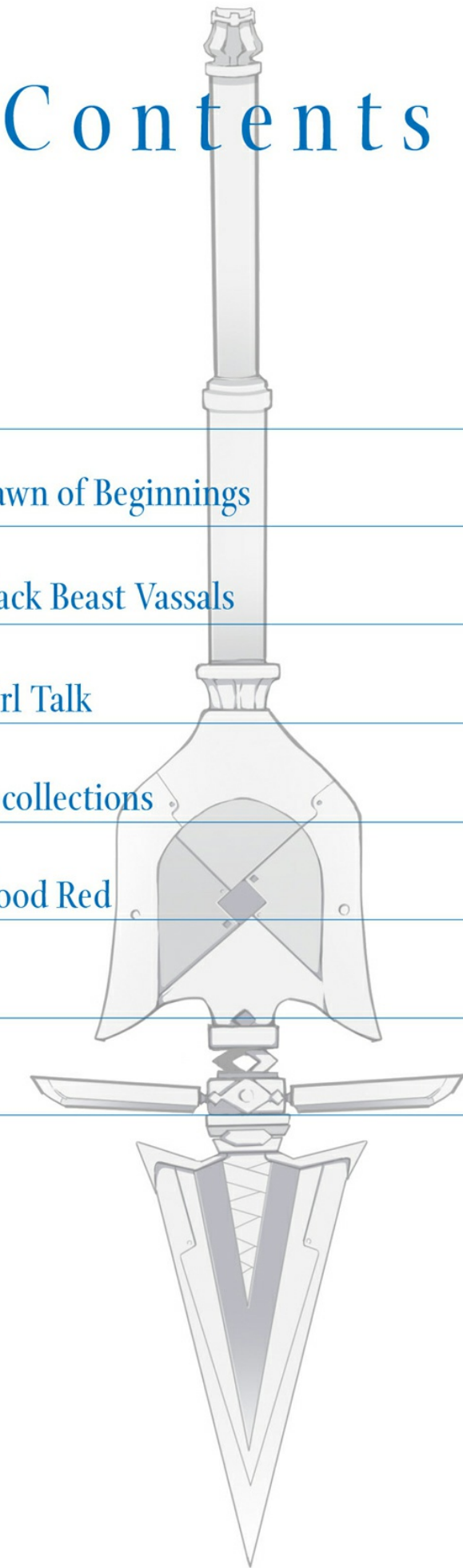
Lost Warlord
Most Ancient Primogenitor,
Eternal Ruler of the Night

Aswadguhl Aziz

Fallgazer
Lord of Destruction,
Bewitching Sovereign of Death

Giada Kukulkin

Chaos Bride
Shape-Shifting,
Lovely Jade-Eyed Despot



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THE TWELVE BLOOD SERVANTS

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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PRESS
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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 21

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

INTRO

I felt like someone was calling my name.

Brushing my long, blond hair off my cheek, I gently lifted my face.

It was the last stop on the monorail running along the coast. I was the last person left in the train car.

Framed by a square window, the scenery slowly scrolled past my vision.

A serene sky. A blue sea. A horde of buildings standing still under powerful sunlight. This was the landscape of the artificial isle of eternal summer.

Leaning back against my seat, I gazed absentmindedly at that vista.

The vibrations from the still-accelerating motors spread faintly through the soles of my feet.

When I looked at the city through the glass of the nicely air-conditioned train car, it was as though I was hovering in a vat of cold water. Slightly stifling but not altogether unpleasant. It felt nostalgic somehow.

Seabirds flew alongside the monorail train as it crossed a bridge spanning a canal.

Just then, someone called my name.

“Morning, Aurora.”

“...Eh?”

Taken aback, I shifted my gaze toward the voice.

I should have been the only person in the car, but there was someone standing right there.

The girl wore the same school uniform as I did. She had steel-colored hair.

Based on the ribbon on her chest, I thought she was probably in the same

grade I was. I didn't recognize her face, though.

She had pretty, mature-looking eyes, but she didn't seem intimidating. If anything, the silly expression on her face made her seem quite sociable. It set me at ease a little.

"Who...are you? Why do you know my name?"

I looked up at the steely-haired girl and inquired about this.

For some reason, my awkward, trembling voice seemed foreign to me.

When was the last time I'd spoken to anyone before this? I really couldn't remember. I'd forgotten even the way I used to talk.

"Because you're Kojou's friend."

The girl with steel-colored hair spoke with a little smile on her face.

The monorail train tilted as it rounded a curve.

Her hair rose and fluttered to match.

For some reason, the way it ignored gravity made me think of a dragon soaring in the sky.

A dragon with a steel-colored mane—

"...Kojou?" I prompted back, perplexed.

It took me a little while to understand that this was someone's name.

It wasn't a common name by any means, yet the instant I heard her invoke it, my heart stirred.

"Yes, Kojou Akatsuki, the boy who was once called the Fourth Primogenitor—the World's Mightiest Vampire. You know him well, Aurora Florestina."

The girl continued on, seeing right through my inner turmoil.

"What are you talking about?"

My diction unwittingly grew rougher as I replied.

"Vampires and whatever are just made up, right? There's no way they really exist...!"

“You have a point... There aren’t any vampires on this island...”

Surprisingly, the girl readily accepted this.

She was staring at my lap or rather at the single book that sat on it. It was the tale of a vampire who commanded twelve beasts to serve him.

“That’s why you need to wake up soon, Aurora the Twelfth—”

The girl drew her lips close to my ear and whispered this to me.

Rattle, went the monorail train as it lurched. It had switched tracks.

I instantly picked the book up from my lap as it threatened to fall off. By the time I lifted my head once more, the girl with steel-colored hair had vanished from sight. I was the only one there.

Was I daydreaming? I wondered as I bit my lip.

The monorail kept on running.

The silver-colored cars of the train slipped through gaps between inorganic, gray buildings.

The bare rail was curved almost like an artery. It was part of an artificial city that had been constructed with carbon fiber, resin, and nanotechnology.

Though the landscape should have been familiar to me, I shook my head instead, feeling vaguely perplexed at it.

Something about it differed from the landscape in my memories, but I couldn’t tell what.

The world always looked so nonsensical that I worried I’d misremembered.

The powerful rays of sun pouring down, the glimmering surface of the sea—My heart leaped fiercely when I realized that was all above my head.

The uninterrupted, pure-blue sky unfurled beneath me as far as my eyes could see.

The buildings from the sky toward the surface.

I made an incoherent yelp at the world where the sky and the ground were inverted.

The monorail kept running through the city.

A city without vampires.

CHAPTER ONE
DAWN OF BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER ONE

DAWN OF BEGINNINGS

1

“Please do not...let go of me, senpai.”

Yukina Himeragi’s voice quivered as she looked at Kojou with moist eyes. Her slender fingers, pleasantly cool to the touch, were clenched tightly around his to ensure they would not come loose.

“Absolutely not, understand?! You absolutely must not let go! I will be angry if you do!”

“Er, we’re going down a staircase, so it’s the handrail you should be grabbing, not me.”

Kojou turned to Yukina in exasperation as she pleaded with him, an especially serious look in her eyes.

They were on the topmost floor of Keystone Gate—the giant structure located at the very center of Itogami Island.

An enormous crack ran along its outer wall. The ceiling was half wrecked. Pieces of the building’s interior had collapsed all over the place as if someone had clawed them right out. These were vestiges of the deadly battle with The Blood.

The stairs they’d used to go up had already been annihilated without a trace. The power had gone out, leaving the elevators immobile. It was a long way down from here to the floor below. On top of that, rubble was piled up everywhere. Now that he’d lost his vampire powers, Kojou definitely wouldn’t get away unscathed if he jumped down.

Fortunately, there was a fire escape outside the windows on the topmost

floor.

This was a folded metal ramp—emergency stairs, in other words.

At first glance, the stairs seemed shaky and unreliable, but making them compact for storage had probably been priority number one.

On top of that, Keystone Gate had been constructed in a peculiar manner, like an inverted pyramid, which meant the fire escape seemed rather warped as well. Kojou felt as though he were a rock climber descending a sheer cliff.

That said, since it really was a fire escape, it came installed with minimal safety features. Caution was important, but he figured they didn't need to be especially afraid, either.

"I know it's cheaply made, but I never expected you to be scared. Normally, you'd leap onto footing way less steady than this without any problem, right?"

"Y-you are mistaken. I am merely questioning the stability of the fire escape. It is not that I am frightened whatsoever. You are mistaken, I assure you."

Glaring at Kojou as she watched him descend the stairs, Yukina raised a voice that didn't sound very assured.

Though she pretended otherwise, Yukina had a whiff of acrophobia. More accurately, she wasn't really scared of heights per se but of any place unnaturally separated from the ground—she had a hard time with artificial constructions like airplanes and viewing platforms.

From her perspective, misshapen emergency stairs against Keystone Gate's uppermost floor were probably nothing short of pure terror.

"Ahhh, got it. I'll go down first, then. That should make you feel a little safer."

"Er...no, that's...but...aaah!"

Yukina uneasily bit her lip when Kojou shook her hand off his.

He stepped onto the aluminum alloy staircase and leaned outside the building.

The thin stairs creaked from the weight of his body. The strong ocean breeze ruffled his hair.

Kojou was sixty meters or so off the ground. Little wonder that looking at his feet was somewhat unnerving; still, the handrails had fall prevention straps, so the fire escape wasn't quite as dangerous as it appeared.

"S-senpai, please wait! I am not yet e-emotionally prepared for...!"

Yukina hurried after him, worried about being left behind. When she descended the stairs with precarious movements, Kojou glanced up at her only to immediately avert his gaze. Given his relative position, he'd naturally ended up staring straight under Yukina's skirt.

Striving to maintain his emotional composure, Kojou kept his head lowered and his mouth shut as he went down. The staircase was a fair bit longer than he'd imagined. To Yukina in her stressed-out state, the staircase had to feel even longer still.

Kojou was right about halfway down when she abruptly raised her voice.

"Senpai, look!"

"Eh?"

Doing as Yukina told him, Kojou looked up. An unfortunately timed gust of wind had made the hem of her skirt rise with a flutter. Her white, slender, taut, supple thighs dazzled his eyes.

"Wait a... Just where are you looking?!"

Noticing his gaze, Yukina let out a distinct yelp.

"You're the one who told me to look!"

"I—I did not mean at me. I meant the sky! Look at the sky...!"

Kojou glared back and lobbed an objection as she pointed above them.

"Sky?"

He dubiously narrowed his eyes as he looked up.

It was a gray sky just after daybreak. The ocean horizon glowed red to the east.

If that was all, the morning scenery would not deserve special mention, but a bizarre sight, which by rights should not have existed, stretched through the sky

above Itogami Island.

A floating metropolis the color of steel hovered like a mirage. It was a fantastical, mechanized city, an artificial isle that was the spitting image of Itogami Island. This phantom ruin covered the entire sky. It was the city called Nod.

Shahryar Ren, president of MAR, had used the Keystone Gate, an enormous sorcerous device, along with the demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor to summon it from another world.



This was the place where the ancient gods known as the Devas had exiled their criminals. They'd also employed the fortress in conflicts with fellow gods.

But now something strange was happening to Nod.

Color was gradually fading from the steel city illuminated by the rays of the sun.

The contours of the geometrically shaped buildings had faded and warped, allowing Kojou and Yukina to see the sky behind it. Its very existence was growing less and less tangible.

"Nod is...vanishing? The sorcerous device's effect gave out?"

Kojou murmured this, looking up at the sky in a daze from farther down the staircase.

Just because he couldn't see it didn't mean that Nod had ceased to be. The obvious explanation was that the magical gateway connecting Nod to their world had closed.

"No, the Keystone Gate continues to function as a sorcerous device even now. I bet the gate to Nod only appears at night."

Yukina, still clinging tightly to the staircase midway, spoke with a calmness that belied the frightened expression on her face.

Much magic was affected by time and geography, and a decent amount of spells could only be activated at particular times. The magic Shahryar Ren had employed seemed to be one such ritual.

"So when the sun sets, the gate will open again?"

"I can't say for sure, but I think so."

"I see... If not, he wouldn't be able to come back to our world from Nod, either."

Kojou's lips twisted as he absorbed her words.

Shahryar Ren's objective was to monopolize the Legacy of the Sinful God and its power so as to place the entire world under the Devas' rule once more. He would never have gone to the floating city without having prepared a way to

return beforehand.

“Either way, chasing after MAR is futile until night falls.”

“That was all part of his plan, too, huh?”

Yukina’s words brought a languid sigh out of Kojou.

The Electoral War had already brought attention to Itogami Island even before something as spectacular as this happened. The entire world had to already know about the gate to Nod.

Kojou was sure that the governments of every nation and the forces of the Dominions had already begun preparing to go after Ren.

The president of MAR no doubt thought that proceeding with his subjugation of Nod ahead of everyone else put him squarely in the driver’s seat. The more time passed, the more relics MAR Inc. would get its mitts on, and the more their combat strength would grow. This also meant that rescuing Aurora would only get progressively more difficult.

“Well, not that I could do anything even if the gate was open right now.”

Kojou weakly shook his head as he took a swipe at himself.

Even if the gate was open, Kojou had neither a way of getting to Nod, nor the means to oppose Shahryar Ren. Now that he wasn’t a vampire anymore, he was no more than a powerless high school student unable to cast a single spell.

“Let’s leave Keystone Gate for the time being. We need information about Nod, and you need some rest, senpai.”

Yukina saw right through his nervousness as she spoke in a tone that made it clear she wouldn’t take no for an answer. Kojou didn’t have any complaints. Their lack of information was a pretty big deal, and he was dead tired.

On top of all that, Kojou had just transformed from a vampire back into a human being, which wasn’t something that happened every day. He had no guarantee there wouldn’t be significant aftereffects. For the time being, the best thing he could do was go to a hospital to rest.

Whether that was actually possible was another matter entirely.

“It’d be great if they just let us pass through without fuss...”

“...I suppose it would.”

Kojou and Yukina peered gingerly from a balcony railing to the ground below.

A horde of rioters surrounding Keystone Gate burst into their field of view.

Explosions that appeared to be the work of Beast Vassals were bursting up into the air, and sparks from sporadic bullet impacts were flying. Spirits gave off a dazzling radiance as their summoners unleashed them. Howls from beast people and gigas echoed all about.

The rioters were citizens of Itogami City—registered demons doubling as ruler candidates, plus their subjects.

The pair hadn’t noticed while on the topmost floor, but the area around Keystone Gate’s entrance had turned into the site of a spectacular armed clash between a horde of MAR Inc. robots and demons on a rampage.

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From what they could make out, there were easily over five thousand rioters besieging Keystone Gate. It looked like around half of them were demons. Although they didn’t appear to be professional demon mercenaries with high-end combat abilities, their agitated state and loss of all restraint meant their momentum was not to be underestimated.

The numerically inferior robot tanks and security pods were unable to stop the resilient beast people and gigas from charging in. Even helicopters engaging them from above were being shot down by spells and vampiric Beast Vassals one after the next.

The rioters were trying to get rid of the MAR Inc. forces occupying Keystone Gate, but since they had no chain of command to speak of, friendly fire and falling-outs were happening all over the place. Small fires had erupted as a consequence of the fighting. As things stood now, approaching Keystone Gate’s entrance and getting sucked into the upheaval seemed like a good way to get killed. A future where the mob mistook Kojou and Yukina for MAR Inc. staff and

mauled them to death seemed entirely in the cards.

“These guys were taking part in the Electoral War, right...?”

“Yes. More than likely.”

“So what made them make a push for Keystone Gate after all this time?”

“...Yes, I wonder...?”

Kojou’s question left Yukina at a loss. The annihilation of The Blood meant that the Electoral War on Itogami Island was as good as over. Kojou, the victor, had lost his powers as a vampire, and Aurora, the new Fourth Primogenitor, had fallen into Nod. The competition had ended without a true victor.

Even if rioters claimed the Electoral War was still ongoing, three well-known primogenitors were still on Itogami Island, and no half-baked fighting force stood a chance against any of them. There shouldn’t have been any reason for the surviving ruler candidates to raid Keystone Gate.

“—I think it’s ’cause they found out MAR was backing the Order of the End all along.”

Suddenly, Kojou and Yukina heard a voice at the balcony where the two of them should have been alone. It was a boyish manner of speaking, but the pitch was that of a young girl’s.

“It’s one thing for Demon Sanctuary insiders to stir things up, but dancing to the tune of outsiders didn’t sit well with them, I guess. Sure is a pain in the butt, huh? I kinda get how they feel, though.”

“...!!”

Turning toward the girl, who’d shown up out of nowhere, Yukina reflexively went on guard. She might have assumed that the rioting demons had surged up the fire escape.

Yet when Yukina moved to draw her spear from her guitar case, she stopped in surprise.

Before her eyes stood a girl with a boyish air wearing a sports brand parka. Her beautiful face made her seem difficult to approach, but she wore a friendly smile on her lips.

Floating behind her like a ghost was a faceless knight clad in blue armor, a type of devil familiar known as a Guardian.

“Yuuma...!”

“Miss Yuuma?”

Kojou and Yukina spoke the girl’s name in surprise.

“Heya, been a while. Glad you two are all right.”

The girl smiled and raised her right hand in amusement.

Yuuma Tokoyogi. That was her name.

The daughter of the general of the criminal organization LCO, she’d inherited the title of the Witch of Notaria, along with its demonic possession. She’d also been friends with Kojou before he moved to Itogami Island.

“Yuuma, glad to see you... You’re all right, then?”

Kojou rushed close to Yuuma, placing his hands on her shoulders without reservation. It was the kind of closeness you would have with an old friend of the same gender.

Yukina grimaced with dismay at Kojou’s completely guileless action. They didn’t know why Yuuma had appeared at the Keystone Gate just now. He couldn’t exactly blame her for flashing him a look that seemed to say, *Would you be a little more cautious?*

For her part, even Yuuma hadn’t expected Kojou’s reaction. Her cheeks reddened as if he’d shaken her composure slightly. Seeing this, Yukina’s expression hardened further.

Yuuma made a strained, blushing grin as she looked up at Kojou and shook her head.

“That’s because I was totally on the sidelines of the Electoral War. Or more accurately, I couldn’t lay a finger on the Order of the End.”

“Couldn’t lay a finger?”

“The restrictions of your contract with your devil, I take it?”

Why? pondered Kojou with a tilt of his head when Yukina inquired in his

place.

Yuuma lightly shrugged her shoulders with a nod.

“Bingo. The contract I made with my devil to become a witch was to bust Mom out of the Prison Barrier. The Gigafloat Management Corporation promised that if I helped out their Attack Mage Association investigations, they’d release Aya Tokoyogi, but, well...”

“I get it... Since the Order of the End stole the management rights for the island, the Gigafloat Management Corporation lost the ability to decide whether to let her go.”

“Yeah, that’s really rough,” went Kojou, sympathizing with Yuuma.

By obtaining a devil’s familiar known as a Guardian, witches could draw on powers that surpassed human limitations; the cost, however, was being bound to a pact with the devil for the rest of eternity. If a witch defied those terms, the Guardian would instantly change into an executioner and strip its former master of her soul.

With her mother Aya Tokoyogi effectively taken hostage, Yuuma couldn’t lift a finger against the Order of the End. That meant she could scrupulously avoid cooperating with them in any way, but she couldn’t openly interfere with their actions.

“Well, that’s why the most I could do was pretend to be a spy and quietly rescue employees who were trapped in Keystone Gate, I guess.”

Yuuma lifted one of her eyebrows ever so slightly. Kojou looked at her in surprise.

“You helped the staff escape?”

“Yeah, like Director Kazuma Yaze, his homunculus secretary, and whoever.”

“Mr. Kazuma? This would be Motoki Yaze’s elder brother?”

“I see... So he’s safe, too.”

Kojou glanced at Yukina and let out a sigh of relief.

Ever since his identity as the Fourth Primogenitor had been revealed to

Kazuma Yaze, Motoki Yaze's older brother and upper management, the man had helped Kojou a great deal. He'd gone missing after the Order of the End's onslaught, so Kojou and others had been quietly concerned for his well-being.

"Director Yaze is in Stratum Zero of Keystone Gate right now."

Yuuma pointed at her feet. Kojou lowered his gaze in response.

"Stratum Zero... Wait, you don't mean he's at the bottom of the sea...?"

"Apparently, Cain's Coffin was built to safeguard critical Itogami Island data for just this kind of emergency situation in the first place. Aiba should know a lot more about it than I do, though."

Yuuma explained this in a casual tone.

Keystone Gate's Zero Stratum lay zero meters off the seafloor at the very center of Itogami Island. Inside was a secret base in which the submarine known as the Coffin was concealed. A submarine protected by a powerful magical barrier at the bottom of the sea, four hundred meters below sea level, was something even the Order of the End would have a difficult time laying their hands on.

So Kazuma had evacuated aboard the sub with critical Gigafloat Management Corporation data in tow.

"You can access all of Itogami Island's info networks right from the Coffin, see. Even though it's at the bottom of the ocean, it can monitor the island's situation around the clock. He's already aware that The Blood has been destroyed and Kojou's relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor."

"...Eh?"

Kojou gasped at Yuuma's offhand comment.

Kojou went rigid as the girl drew her face close to his and stared. Behind the teasing glint in her eyes was a note of utter seriousness.

Yuuma abruptly broke into a smile.

"Hee-hee, it's true. You really have completely turned back into a human, huh?"

“You can tell?”

Startled, Kojou looked down at his body. Vampires were a demonic race, and they could be distinguished by a few obvious physical traits. Kojou had yet to notice anything that had changed since he'd lost the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“At the very least, I don't feel any magical energy past that of a normal person, even up close like this.”

Yuuma took another step forward. She was so close that all she needed to do was stretch a little and their lips would be touching.

Sensing her sweet, flowery scent, Kojou suddenly tensed up. Belatedly, it dawned on him that she was someone of the opposite gender.

“Yuuma? Um...your face is kinda close...”

“Yeah. I brought it there.”

Yuuma spoke without the slightest hint of guilt as she licked her glossy lips. When Kojou subconsciously tried to take a step back, he found that she already had a firm grasp on his wrists.

“Um, ah...Miss Yuuma...?”

Finding something suspicious about what the other girl was doing, Yukina spoke to her in a very reserved voice.

Yuuma looked back at Yukina, smiling boldly and provocatively.

“Eh?”

Kojou was suddenly taken off guard by the soft sensations coming to him through the palm of one hand. Yuuma had wrapped her hand around Kojou's right palm before pressing it against the swell of her breasts.

Still failing to comprehend what was happening, Kojou groped her breasts. Yuuma gave off a slender image, but she really was well-endowed. Even through her clothes, he could keenly feel just how comfortable their softness and elasticity felt in his hand. Kojou remained halfway in a daze as he savored the sensation.

“Miss Yuuma?! Wh-what are you doing with Akatsuki-senpai?!”

Yukina forced her way in from the side and pried him off Yuuma.

“What do you mean what...? I just thought I’d seduce him a little.”

As she watched the other girl’s indignation with amusement, Yuuma replied in complete composure.

Yukina’s lips twitched in anger.

“S-seduce?! N-now you’ve said it! Just because Akatsuki-senpai is human again doesn’t mean you can pursue him so flagrantly...!”

“...!”

Her intent had been to scold Yuuma, but this only caused the Witch to burst into a fit of laughter. Yuuma’s demeanor only made Yukina open her eyes even wider.

Kojou exhaled in annoyance as he went, “Now, now,” trying to soothe the agitated, panting Yukina.

“Calm down, Himeragi. She’s just up to her old pranks.”

“Now, that’s harsh. I’m pretty much always serious with you because you never treat me like a girl, Kojou.”

Yuuma closed one eye and leered at him. Her expression was playful, in complete contrast to her statement.

“So? What are you scheming this time?” Kojou prompted back with a pronounced lack of enthusiasm. Yuuma touched a hand to her chest with a less confident expression.

“I thought I’d check whether you’d have a vampiric urge episode, but maybe I’m just not sexy enough for the job? Himeragi, wanna try it with me?”

“I’ll do no such thing!”

Yukina instantly shot her down. Kojou wearily curled his lips.

“I think it’s pretty clear now that I’ve let go of the Fourth Primogenitor’s power, I ain’t getting vampiric urges anymore, so take a step back already.”

“If you’re not going to have vampiric urges, then you shouldn’t be that worked up. Or maybe you’re a little self-conscious about me?”

Kojou tried to thrust her away, but she put his arm in a lock and pressed her body against his.

When Yukina saw this, her temples twitched rather spectacularly. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before she really blew a gasket.

Yuuma reluctantly let go of Kojou. She must have noticed the ice-cold lethality hovering in the air, too.

“Well, that’s enough for now. If I get too carried away, I’ll upset Kojou.”

“Why do I have to get upset over you?”

He glared at Yuuma with half-lidded eyes. She wore an expression like that of a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

She smiled with blatantly feigned innocence.

“Setting aside the fact you’ve really lost your powers, I’m relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Kojou, you’d be surprised how many sorcerous criminals have a grudge against the Fourth Primogenitor. I was worried how they might act if they knew you didn’t have powers anymore.”

“That’s—”

Yuuma’s assertion gave Kojou a pronounced chill. As the Fourth Primogenitor, he’d definitely earned the ire of quite a few demons, ranging from criminal organizations conducting international terrorism to nobles in the Dominions. To be blunt, if they attacked him to take revenge, he wouldn’t last two seconds in his current state.

“But if Himeragi’s with you, it’ll be all right, I guess? Take good care of him.”

“Er...y-yes... I understand.”

When the topic suddenly shifted to her, Yukina nodded with all the force she could muster on the spot.

Though it somehow came off like Yuuma was testing Yukina, Kojou wondered

if that was just the thick layer of gloss she'd smeared over genuine feelings.

"I guess if I'm talking about danger, the same goes for Itogami Island, though?"

Yuuma's smile abruptly vanished.

"The whole justification for recognizing this island as an independent state was it being the Fourth Primogenitor's territory. Now that it's lost its main backer, nothing's gonna be the same. The fact that the Fourth Primogenitor's gone makes this place a target for countries the whole world over."

"Itogami Island's...a target...?"

Blood drained from Kojou's whole body.

The rest of the world already viewed Itogami Island as a threat because it was the Altar of The Cleansing. On top of that, now everyone knew it was the key to the gate to Nod.

Itogami Island's threat level had vaulted even higher. But at the same time, its value as a Demon Sanctuary had plunged.

Neither the government of Japan, which had once relinquished its territorial rights over Itogami Island, nor the Holy Ground Treaty Organization, which had decided to postpone dealing with the issue, were likely to remain silent. He didn't think the Dominion forces would just let it go, either.

The possibility remained that a ferocious territorial struggle that put the Electoral War to shame would break out on Itogami Island in the not-so-distant future.

The island no longer had the World's Mightiest Vampire to keep these forces in check. That was because Kojou had cast the power of the Fourth Primogenitor aside—by ceding it to Aurora instead.

He couldn't help feeling somewhat responsible about this, but still.

"You're wrong. That's not true."

Kojou pleaded his case to Yuuma with an earnest look in his eyes. The Fourth Primogenitor hadn't ceased to exist by any means.

“The Fourth Primogenitor—Avrora—is in Nod. MAR President Shahryar Ren used the Keystone Gate to open the way, and then she got sucked into it.”

“And?”

Yuuma posed the question in a very gentle tenor. It was the voice of a kind older sister lending her voice to the words of her unreasonable younger brother.

“I’m going to Nod to bring her back. If the Fourth Primogenitor is there to lead the island, that will stop it from getting pulled into a war, right?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t accept your proposal.”

The Witch coldly shook her head. The invisible line her demeanor drew between the two of them left Kojou perplexed.

“...Yuuma?”

“I can’t let *a civilian who has nothing to do with this* do something dangerous like that—that’s the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s view, at least.”

“I’m an...unrelated civilian...?”

Kojou stared at Yuuma, bewildered. He was shaken when he realized anew that without the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, he really was just a weak human being.

He hadn’t wanted the power to begin with. The grandiose title of World’s Mightiest Vampire meant nothing to him. If relinquishing the abilities of the Fourth Primogenitor had allowed him to save Avrora from disappearing, he’d make the same decision a hundred times over.

However, this had resulted in Avrora plunging into Nod after being manipulated by Shahryar Ren. In that moment, he’d been powerless to bring her back. That was where Kojou’s decision had led.

“What good does it do for a powerless human to go to Nod?”

Yuuma thrust that cruel question into the aghast Kojou, driving the nail deeper.

“But...if I don’t...bring Avrora back, she’ll...”

Kojou glared at Yuuma as he spoke. Somehow, though, his gaze seemed hollow, and his voice had lost its initial force.

Yuuma gently lifted both hands, wrapping them around Kojou's cheeks.

"...!"

He tried to shake her off, but Yuuma pulled Kojou close with a surprising amount of strength. She made like she was going to kiss him before she froze, a soft smile coming to her lips.

"Yeah. I didn't hate the Fourth Primogenitor Kojou, but I really like the human one better. Being under the sunlight suits you."

She smiled fondly at him and touched a finger to his lips.

Her words silenced him. Yuuma was an old friend, so she knew what he'd been like before he transformed into a vampire.

"Later," she said, gently thrusting him away.

Yukina propped up the tottering Kojou as their fields of view distorted, as though they were witnessing a mirage. It was the prelude to a spatial control spell.

"Yuuma!"

"...Himeragi, take good care of Kojou, 'kay? Keep a good eye on him for me so he doesn't do anything stupid."

She raised a finger in front of her lips with a suggestive little wink.

Yukina widened her eyes in surprise.

"Miss Yuuma?!"

"Stop!"

Kojou was stricken by a floaty feeling, as if he'd been cut loose from gravity. Yuuma was about to teleport the pair outside of Keystone Gate.

"Bye-bye, Kojou. Treasure the everyday life you finally got back, 'kay?"

Her whisper-like voice gently echoed in his ear, but he could no longer see her. The next instant, Keystone Gate also vanished from view. Kojou and Yukina

were hurled onto a desolate urban road lined with trees.

3

A tiny ripple-like sway remained as Kojou and Yukina vanished from sight. Making sure that they were far away, Yuuma released the connection in space.

Usually, teleportation was a high-end spell requiring a vast amount of coordinate calculations, but to a witch like her, it required about as much work as snapping her fingers. The odd sense of fatigue she felt now probably came down to feeling guilty over Kojou.

It killed her that she had only been able to stand back and watch the fight between him and The Blood from the sidelines. She also wished she could lend him her power so he could rescue Aurora, the Twelfth—if Yuuma had been stronger, she was certain things would have ended differently. It tore at her.

It was decidedly not her wish to send him far from Keystone Gate against his will. In spite of that, she'd been told this was the best way to ensure Kojou's safety now that he'd lost his immortality. She couldn't argue after hearing that.

At the very least, this meant there was no longer any worry the rioters around Keystone Gate could pose a threat to him and Yukina. She supposed she should be satisfied with that.

"It's done. I got Kojou out."

Yuuma booted up an encrypted app on her smartphone and reported to the Coffin.

"Well done, Assistant Attack Mage Tokoyogi."

The man on the other line was Kazuma Yaze. The fact that he, rather than his blue-haired secretary, had taken the call might have been an indication that he trusted Yuuma a little, despite her former criminal ties.

"So his role ends here?"

Yuuma asked this in a cheerful voice that contained a hint of venom. She couldn't help but feel disquiet over the Corporation's treatment of Kojou, using

him as Fourth Primogenitor to the fullest only to brush him aside as though he were an outsider the minute he turned back into a human.

For his part, Kazuma replied calmly without the slightest stirring of emotion.

“Kojou Akatsuki is now a powerless high schooler. We should not expect anything else from him. This is for his sake as well as ours.”

“I suppose it is, but the way I see it, Kojou’s still at the center of everything. There’s all kinds of trouble swirling around him.”

Yuuma brought this up almost as if she was talking to herself. She felt like Kazuma was scowling on the other end of the line.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. I just have a feeling about this... I should warn you, though.”

Yuuma smiled and gazed up at the glowing dawn sky. The blood-colored firmament concealed the gate to Nod, Kojou Akatsuki’s intended destination.

“My intuition’s usually on the money.”

Yuuma left that as the final word as she hung up.

Leaving a ripple-like swaying in the air behind, the young Witch dissolved into thin air and vanished from sight.

4

Kojou and Yukina suddenly plunged out of thin air onto a street. Having lost their sense of balance, they nearly tumbled onto the road, but the two mutually supported each other and managed to avoid that outcome.

They were midway up a long, gentle path on the slope of a hill, right in the middle of an oddly familiar intersection.

“Where...is this?”

Kojou stridently shook the cobwebs out of his head and looked around.

Running along the roadside were Electoral War refugee tents and rows of cardboard boxes containing MAR-provided emergency supplies. That gave the

place a far different impression than usual, but the building beyond the gate was intimately familiar to him.

“It would seem Miss Yuuma teleported us to the front gate of Saikai Academy.”

The expression on Yukina’s face was a mix of bewilderment and relief. Technically, they’d been evacuated from Keystone Gate and bypassed the rioters besieging it, but it was closer to the truth to say they’d been tossed out like yesterday’s garbage. It was surprising Yuuma had done that given her soft spot for Kojou.

“Shit... The hell were you thinking, Yuuma?!”

Kojou gave into his anger and punched the roadside tree in front of him. *Thud*, went the low echo as he stopped moving then and there. When he regained his composure, his face was twisted and pale from the pain.

“That hurt...”

“Wh-what do you think you are doing?! Senpai, you are no longer a vampire, and you’re not using any enhancement ritual spells, so of course punching a tree would hurt you! Show me your hand!”

Yukina yanked his right hand toward her. When she saw the painful-looking tears in his skin from having punched tree bark, she was almost beside herself as she scowled.

“Um...if you move it like that it hurts pretty ba... Ow, ow, ow...!”

“My goodness...at least it does not seem that you’ve broken any bones...!”

“That seriously hurts...! I’m really sorry—I’ll be more careful!”

Yukina dragged Kojou toward a fountain at the edge of the school yard. Cleaning the wound with cold water in part to cool the affected part, she then produced a large number of adhesive bandages from the pocket of her uniform. Yukina continued to do as she pleased, treating Kojou with a practiced hand.

“...Sorry, Himeragi. You’re a huge help.”

Kojou thanked her right as she was wrapping up her first aid treatment, as though he’d only just realized that he should. He may have hurt himself for

nothing, but the experience had cooled his head down a fair bit at the very least.

“You really must be careful right now, senpai. Unlike before, you will die like anyone else if you are gravely injured. So no getting your head cut off or every inch of your body impaled!”

“Er, it’s not like I ever wanted to get banged up...”

Kojou tried a fumbling rebuttal, but Yukina was still clinging to his hand with a worried look on her face. His injury felt like it was gradually warming, something he chalked up to her using a healing spell.

Gazing at the side of her face, a pained smile came over Kojou as he sighed.

She might have been a little pushy about it, but there was no question Yukina was genuinely concerned for his well-being. *I should be more grateful to her.* Just as Kojou thought that...

“Yukina!”

...someone called out to Yukina from behind Kojou.

The speaker was a schoolgirl wearing a Saikai Academy school instructor jersey. It was Minami Shindou, a high school freshman.

She was Kojou’s former junior from his basketball days and a current classmate of Yukina’s; for some reason, she went by the nickname Cindy. When she saw that Kojou and Yukina were holding hands, a knowing look came over her face. Sensing her friend’s gaze, Yukina swiftly pulled her hands away from Kojou’s.

“Good morning, Akatsuki.”

A girl in a regulation uniform beside Minami gave Kojou a prim and proper greeting. This was Sakura Koushima, another of Yukina’s classmates.

“Cindy...and Sakura, too. You’ve both been safe and sound?”

Yukina inquired to the pair with a visible expression of relief. Minami approached Yukina with rapid steps.

“I’m the one who should be saying that! I couldn’t get in touch with you or

Nagisa when the Electoral War started, so I was really worried, and... Oh! Are you hurt, Yukina?!”

“Hurt? Ah, this is all right. It’s nothing serious.”

Yukina had blue bruises and scrapes all over the parts of her arms and legs that her uniform left exposed. They were light wounds that barely needed any treatment at all, but Yukina’s skin was so pale that they stood out. She must have gotten them while clashing with Zana Lashka, Blood Servant of the First Primogenitor, and Yuri Haba, fellow Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

“Did you have a fight with Akatsuki?”

Minami trained a suspicious glare at Kojou.

“Huh? No, of course not.”

Yukina seemed surprised as she shook her head to refute the notion. Minami, however, looked even more suspicious.

“Then how did Akatsuki’s hand get hurt? It looks like he punched someone...”

“Some kind of role-play?”

Sakura interrupted Minami with that question.

“...R-role-play?”

Yukina blinked hard. *Where the hell did that come from?* said the painful expression coming over Kojou, but he knew that trying to get a single word in edgewise would only make things worse. Accordingly, he kept his mouth shut. After a bit of thought, it finally dawned on Yukina that Sakura had been implying they were doing something kinky.

“It was not that...! Senpai... He...met an old acquaintance of his...and then...”

Yukina came up with a vague excuse to deftly steer the topic in a different direction. She must have had Aurora in mind when she cited an old acquaintance of Kojou’s. That certainly wasn’t a lie, but...

“Old acquaintance...”

“Ex-girlfriend?”

Minami and Sakura glanced at each other and nodded as if quite sure of

something. It seemed that they'd taken this as meaning Yukina had been in a physical dispute with an ex-girlfriend of Kojou's.

"Ex-girlfriend, huh..."

"Definitely an ex."

"Eh?"

"So you got in a fight with her. Yukina...did you win?"

"Is that why Akatsuki looks worked up?"

"Eh? Eh...?"

Unable to keep up with her classmates bouncing their own pet fantasies between them, Yukina gingerly looked at the pair's faces back and forth.

"What have you two been ramblin' on about...?"

Of course, Kojou couldn't just stand back and watch. If he didn't chime in and nip this gossip in the bud, he had a feeling it would spread across the school like wildfire.

When he drew closer, Minami turned toward him like she wanted to ask him something. The instant she examined Kojou up close, however, she widened her eyes in surprise and froze. She was visibly tense with reddened cheeks as she audibly cleared her throat.

"Um...Akatsuki, your aura changed a little, huh? It's kinda like...you've gone back to your basketball days..."

"Really? Hard for me to tell, though..."

"Ah...er...that's...um...never mind."

Minami blushed as she vigorously shook her head and lowered her face. It was an unexpectedly demure reaction for a girl usually so lively and athletic.

Glancing at the side of Minami's face, Yukina grew wary as she made an audible "hmm."

Kojou had certainly changed over the past few days—he'd relinquished his vampiric abilities and regained a purely human body. His skin color had improved, and a glint of light had returned to his previously tired eyes.

Maybe this was a return to the old days just like Minami had said. Now that she mentioned it, Yuuma had said something quite similar when she'd looked at Kojou in his current state. What Yukina didn't get was why Minami had to act like a blushing handmaiden about it.

For her part, Sakura danced strictly to her own tune. After checking on the state of Yukina's injuries, she gave Kojou's sleeve a *tug, tug*.

"You'll take responsibility for Yukina becoming damaged goods, won't you?"

"S-Sakura...!"

"Uh, is that even how you use the term *damaged goods*...?" Kojou replied wearily.

It was hard to tell from her demeanor whether Sakura was joking or being serious.

"Is that so?" asked Sakura with an utterly serious look on her face. For some reason, Yukina reddened and lowered her eyes. Kojou wished she would stop inviting more misunderstandings by acting that way.

"Hey, Yukina, what have you been doing until now? Were you with Akatsuki the whole time?"

"N-no...of course I haven't been with him the whole time..."

"But you were with him when he met his ex."

"That was...er... I can only say there were various circumstances..."

Minami and Sakura's follow-up questions to Yukina about what happened at the long-deferred reunion didn't seem like they were going to end anytime soon. Kojou felt a little uncomfortable about that, but he had to admit it was a little amusing to watch Yukina chat with her classmates as an everyday girl instead of as someone from the Lion King Agency or the like.

That being said, from Yukina's point of view, this girlish interrogation session wasn't amusing in the slightest. Her face was twitching as she glanced toward Kojou in search of a rescue, but the next instant, there came a *rattle* as something dropped to the ground close by.

Tumbling until it was partially stabbed into the ground was a long sword

made of pure silver, its blade bare to the world. Kojou and Yukina widened their eyes and tensed up their faces at the familiar sight.

The owner of the sword was a girl wearing the uniform of an unfamiliar school—Yui Haba of the Lion King Agency.

Her eyes were red from weeping. She bit her trembling lip at the sight of Yukina.

“M...Miss Yui?”

Yukina gingerly addressed the girl, who looked like she wasn’t in her right state of mind.

That instant, a flood of tears gushed out of Yui’s moist eyes.

“Y...Yukii...!”

Kojou stood there dumbstruck as Yui raced to Yukina’s side and threw herself to her knees. Heedless of prying eyes, she pressed her face against Yukina’s thighs and began to wail loudly.

“Yukii... I’m so sorry... I...I did somethi...! Something horrible to Yukiiiiii...!”

“Ehhh?! ...W-wait a...”

Yui’s utterly unpredictable behavior left Yukina looking down at her in total confusion.

“P-please stand up, Miss Yui...! You...you have nothing to apologize for...!”

“Wh-what the...? What’s going on here?”

Kojou was adrift at sea as he looked between Yui, crying and begging forgiveness, and the completely bewildered Yukina.

He couldn’t make out even half of what Yui was saying in between her sobs. On top of that, since she’d grabbed onto her friend’s skirt, Yukina was desperately working to keep the girl from stripping it clean off. Kojou was baffled as to how such a chaotic scene had come about. It was then that a short-haired girl wearing the same uniform as Yui—Shio Hikawa—ran over and tried to peel her crying partner off Yukina.

“H-hey, Yui, calm down! You’re making this hard for Himeragi!”

“Ain’t like we could just leave her in the Second Primogenitor’s domain, so I figured we’d just bring her with us... She sure turned into a heap of trouble, though...”

Motoki Yaze appeared right beside Shio, then casually aired that comment like it wasn’t his problem. Apparently, he was responsible for Yuiri and Shio showing up at Saikai Academy.

“Yaze...”

A conflicted expression came over Kojou when he looked back at his friend, who he’d finally reunited with after a considerable absence. They’d both gotten sucked into the Electoral War upon their return from the kingdom of Aldegia, straddling the line between life and death in the process. Kojou wanted to simply let him know how happy he was that they could meet up again safe and sound, but unfortunately, the situation didn’t allow for such sappy comments.

Figuring he’d better help Shio console Yuiri, Kojou approached the pair. Yuiri sensed him and shifted her gaze toward him.

Tears and snot running down her face, she leaped straight into Kojou’s arms.

“K...Kojou... I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“Bwuh...M-Miss Yuiri...?!”

Unable to shake the spectacularly grief-stricken girl off him, Kojou grew very nervous. Setting aside the fact that she’d apparently crossed blades with Yukina, he didn’t have a clue why she was apologizing to *him*.

“Hey, Himeragi, what’s going on here?! What the heck?!”

“I’m the one at fault here... I attacked Yukii by surprise, and then...”

“H-hey, please calm down, Miss Yuiri... It’s all right—it’s okay...”

Yuri curled up at Kojou’s feet as she kept on repeating how sorry she was.

Watching the two of them from afar, Minami and Sakura nodded deeply as if both proclaiming, *Ah, I see*.

“So that’s Akatsuki’s ex...?”

“Yukina’s really something to push her far enough that she ended up like

this.”

“Y-you are mistaken! Miss Yuiri is not Akatsuki-senpai’s former girlfriend; she is someone else... You have this all wrong...! M-Miss Hikawa, I’m begging you, please stop Miss Yuiri!”

Yukina desperately tried to vindicate herself even as she sought aid from Shio, who hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Ahhh, s-suppose you’re right... But is that Kojou Akatsuki? He looks hotter than... Er, rather, he seems different than usual...”

“Miss Hikawa...?”

A suspicious look came over Yukina when she watched Shio say the last thing they needed to hear under the circumstances. Shio gasped, then returned to her senses with a shake of her head.

“No, it’s nothing...! Come on, Yuiri, that’s enough. Get away from him already...”

“But...but...!”

Yui was still making little sobs and clinging to Kojou by the time Shio wrapped her arms around the girl and pulled her off. Yui simply didn’t have any stamina left to resist her. Shio grasped the girl firmly by the neck and pulled her away from Kojou inch by inch.



“Thanks, Shio. You’re a lifesaver.”

Kojou smiled a bit as he thanked her. The energetic, almost dazzling way he stared back at Shio made her voice go shrill.

“N-nah... I’m not doing this for you... No need to thank me...”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re both safe. You fought the Second Primogenitor, right?”

“Y-yeah, I’m glad you’re safe as well, Kojou Akatsuki. So could you move away just a little? The way you are now, I’m getting a little n-nervous...”

“Kojou... I’m sorry. It’s...it’s all my fault...”

Yui was starting to break into tears again while Shio and Kojou tried to soothe and calm her. Minami and Sakura pressed close to Yukina, questioning her in detail about her relationship to Yui. Yaze put up a front and acted like this had nothing to do with him.

Though it was early morning, a scene of this size was bound to stand out. Sure enough, people who’d taken refuge inside the school were gathering together to eavesdrop on the uproar.

Suddenly, the curious onlookers parted ways. Boldly walking into the center of the crowd was a high school girl wearing a flamboyant, deliberately askew Saikai Academy uniform. When the citizens showered reverence upon her, they recoiled in fear from her morose gaze.

“What the hell is going on?”

The girl—Asagi Aiba—had a weary look on her face.

5

“You ceded the power of the Fourth Primogenitor...?! ”

Shio’s surprised voice echoed through the cramped room on the third floor of the Special Education Building, which belonged to the Demon Sanctuary Research Club—Dem-Club for short. Asagi had just dragged Kojou and the others into it so that they wouldn’t draw even more attention to themselves in

the schoolyard.

Shio was aghast at his unexpected confession. Even Yui was too shocked to keep crying.

For his part, all Kojou could do was laugh sheepishly while scratching his head with a slight blush.

“Yeah. In this case, maybe it’s better to say I returned them to their rightful owner.”

“Hmm. So that’s it. HUUUUH.”

Sitting in a folding-style pipe chair, Asagi made indifferent sounds while she followed along, then plucked a potato chip from a bag on the table. “Yeah,” went Kojou with a nod.

“Whoa, this manju’s pretty tasty. Wanna try some, Himeragi?”

“I am most grateful.”

Sitting beside Kojou, Yukina nibbled on the manju he handed to her.

Yaze stood in a corner of the room with a spare electric kettle in hand.

“The water’s hot! Green tea or coffee, which do you prefer?”

“Hey! This is no time to relax! This is a really big deal, isn’t it?!”

Shio shouted once more, indignant at the lackadaisical exchanges between Kojou and the others.

Yaze rummaged in the back of a shelf to get enough mugs for everyone.

“You say that, but Kojou was only the Fourth Primogenitor for a year... If you think of this as just goin’ back to normal, it’s not something to get all worked up about, right?”

“Not that I knew about it until pretty recently, mind you.”

Asagi glared resentfully at Kojou with half-lidded eyes. Mouth still stuffed with manju, he awkwardly averted his gaze. “Oof,” went Shio, faltering.

“Th-that might be true, but still...!”

“I’m sorry... This all happened because I tried to kill Aurora...”

Yui hung her head as she murmured fragmented words.

Kojou and Yukina shook their heads to let her know that wasn't the case.

"Nah, it ain't your fault at all. I'm the one who went and decided to hand the power back to Avrora. When you get right down to it, this whole thing happened 'cause that bastard The Blood kicked off the Electoral War anyway."

"But," protested Yui, trying to refute him with a frail voice. Regardless, it was really the Second Primogenitor's fault she'd tried to kill Avrora. He'd convinced her that had been the only way to stop Kojou from going on a rampage.

Furthermore, the Second Primogenitor had made her try to assassinate Avrora in order to draw The Blood out of hiding, so in all likelihood, she wouldn't have killed Avrora either way. If anything, when you considered what had actually happened, it was all thanks to Yui that Kojou had defeated The Blood without rampaging or Avrora vanishing.

There was little doubt that the only person who really couldn't forgive her for having tried to off Avrora was Yui herself. *She really is a good, kind girl down to the bone*, thought Kojou.

"Well, forget Kojou for now—the real issue is Avrora falling into Nod."

Yaze casually commented on this as he poured several cups of coffee with an oddly well-practiced hand.

"Yeah," replied Kojou with a sober expression. His blood had rushed to his head right after Yuuma had sent him packing from Keystone Gate, but when he calmly went over what had transpired, he had to admit that she'd been right on the money. Now that he was an ordinary civilian who couldn't use magic, Kojou would have difficulty returning from Nod alive, let alone bringing Avrora back with him.

That didn't mean he could just leave Avrora as she was, though. It wasn't simply a matter of his personal sense of responsibility. Shahryar Ren being able to use Avrora, now the World's Mightiest Vampire, was the real problem.

What to do? thought Kojou, crossing his arms. Yaze twisted his lips with a conflicted look, but the very next moment, Yui wiped her tears and thrust up her hand.

“Me! I’ll do it—!”

What in the world are you trying to say? Shio seemed to say as she shot the girl a worried upward glance.

“Y-Yuiri?”

“I’ll go bring Miss Avrora back!”

“Huh?”

Shio was so surprised that she let out a shrill, inane shriek.

“Nuh-uh, what are you saying, Yuiri? There’s no way you can do that on your own!”

“But it’s my fault Miss Avrora got caught by The Blood and my fault she was taken into Nod!”

Yuii rebutted Shio with a strangely obstinate demeanor.

“Um, Miss Yuiri... Not only will I insist that you had nothing to do with this, but I’ll also remind you that The Blood was the one who drove Akatsuki to the brink of a rampage in the first place—”

“Senpai played a part as well,” Yukina pointed out to Yuiri in a reserved tone of voice.

Just then, Yaze interjected with a sarcastic expression as he poured some green tea into a cup before Yukina.

“Right, right. Plus, when it comes to trying to kill Avrora, Yukina’s just as guilty as you are.”

“...So I am. I apologize.”

Yukina tightened her shoulders and hung her head. Yuiri hadn’t actually been the only one after Avrora’s life. In fact, Yukina had tried to kill the vampire girl for the exact same reason. Unable to resist her emotions, however, she’d defected to the side trying to protect Avrora in short order.

“Er, Himeragi, you tried to save Avrora immediately after that, so... Ah, um, of course I’m not saying you were in the wrong, Yuiri...”

Shio, familiar with the fine details firsthand, made a careless slip of the

tongue while trying to defend Yukina.

“I have to!!”

Yui gripped the sword at her feet. Her voice was trembling, and she wore a brooding expression.

“I have to save my friend Aurora!!”

“I—I get it, Yui! I’ll help, too! So put Rosen Chevalier Plus down, okay? Slowly...slowly...just like that...”

Shio desperately tried to soothe Yui, who held the drawn blade in her trembling grip. Kojou unwittingly clutched his head. He was happy Yui had become so fond of the vampire girl, but the extent of it made him uneasy.

“Your friend Aurora, huh...”

Asagi spoke offhandedly, rubbing her temples as if she was enduring some kind of headache.

She’d been in contact with Aurora in middle school, but just like Kojou, most of those memories were already lost, consumed in the Blazing Feast that had turned Kojou into the Fourth Primogenitor. The headache was an aftereffect of that.

Grimacing from that pain, Asagi calmly posed a question to Yui.

“It’s fine that you want to save her, but how are you going to do that?”

“Th...that’s...”

Yui jostled with Shio over her sword, her perplexed gaze hovering as she replied.

“Shio, what’ll we do...?!”

“Don’t ask me...”

“...Hey, Asagi. Can’t you access Keystone Gate and control the gate to Nod?”

Kojou raised a question that offered a sliver of hope.

Shahryar Ren had used a dagger-shaped sorcerous device to control Keystone Gate. Kojou thought that Asagi, who was able to freely manipulate Itogami

Island's information network, might be able to directly hack the giant sorcerous device known as Keystone Gate to do the same thing as Ren.

"Hey, I just program as a hobby. Sorcery's not my forte."

Asagi put her chin against her palm with a mildly sour look. Despite her incredible reputation in the hacking world, the girl herself was insistent to the last that programming was merely a hobby. Analyzing a sorcerous device was probably something she had no interest in whatsoever.

But to Kojou, she was his last remaining hope at the moment. He couldn't just back down.

"That got explained earlier, right? MAR was involved in building Keystone Gate so maybe we can get some kind of information out of it."

"Information...huh."

"Hmm," went Asagi, tapering her lips as if she'd just thought of something.

The parallel world of Nod was still shrouded in mystery. They didn't even know the true nature of the sorcerous device in Shahryar Ren's possession. What they were sure of, however, was that the construction of Itogami Island had only taken place forty years prior. The Gigafloat Management Corporation still had documents from that time. Naturally, the blueprints and construction records for Keystone Gate had to be among them.

"Even if I can control the gate, what do you plan on doing in Nod? Starting a war with MAR special forces?"

Asagi stared dispassionately at Kojou as she asked him that. Finding it difficult to speak, Kojou lowered his voice in reply.

"I've been thinking about that a bit. Can you use The Cleansing to turn me back to a vampire?"

"Wha—?!"

"Kojou...?!"

Shio and Yui glared at him with wide-open eyes.

Yaze briefly whistled, but Yukina stayed silent. Perhaps a part of them had

anticipated Kojou would say this.

Asagi, too, didn't seem particularly surprised as she shrugged her shoulders.

"I guess I probably can."

""You can?!""

Shio and Yuiri shouted simultaneously. Asagi cocked her head a bit as if to ask, *Why are you so surprised?*

"The story goes, Cain the Sinful God used the original Cleansing to change all the Devas in the world to regular old demons. Under the right conditions, I can probably manage that with Kojou alone."

"J-just like that...!"

"Wait, Kojou Akatsuki. This is a decision with lifelong ramifications, so shouldn't you think about it a little more carefully? Desiring to be a demon yourself means abandoning your rights as a human being...! A-are you fine with this, Asagi Aiba?!"

"Like I told you—under the right conditions."

Shio and Yuiri tried to corner Asagi, but she brushed them away like nuisances.

"I'm not a proper magic user, so I can't do the fine control that's required to mess with a person's individual cells. The best I can do is blot out demonic energy or turn a stretch of ocean into strawberry jelly."

"I see... Right, the real Cleansing is supposed to be a huge burst of forbidden magic..."

Kojou raised his brows. The Cleansing was a vile spell with maximal destructive power, but that made it frighteningly difficult to control. Even if you activated it with Itogami Island, the sorcerous device created for the sole purpose of triggering The Cleansing, the only people who had been able to follow through with it to date had been Meiga Itogami and Dimitrie Vattler. In those instances, even they had required magical calculations borrowed from the Priestess of Abel or Asagi to make it controllable.

On her own, Asagi could only activate a small portion of The Cleansing's

power. Fine control was just too much to hope for.

“Let’s say we turn Kojou back to a vampire. First of all, what about the Beast Vassals he needs? The Cleansing can only handle the body. Do you really think it can handle Beast Vassals?”

“Oh...”

Asagi’s difficult question stumped Kojou. The shock on his face was evident.

“Now that you mention it, The Blood said that creating the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals required ‘sacrificing’ countless living Devas...”

Yukina wore a grave expression as she recalled something.

A vampire’s Beast Vassals were summoned creatures from another world. Since they were tethered to one’s blood, only vampires could employ them on account of the infinite negative life energy at their disposal. Barring special cases, such as instances of cannibalism, there was only one way to acquire new Beast Vassals: A vampire of the parent generation had to allot blood and Beast Vassals to the newly born vampire—in other words, they had to clone the Beast Vassals. This was why vampire abilities weakened with successive generations.

However, no parent had granted Beast Vassals to the artificial vampire known as the Fourth Primogenitor. Nor was it possible to acquire the World’s Mightiest Beast Vassals through cannibalism.

That was why the Devas had needed to sacrifice their own species to produce the World’s Mightiest Beast Vassals for the World’s Mightiest Vampire to use. You couldn’t acquire those kinds of familiars without considerable sacrifice. Of course, there was no way Kojou and company were going to do that in the present.

“Guess you’re right... Beast Vassals... Beast Vassals, huh...”

Kojou exhaled, seemingly deflated.

As demons went, vampires were pretty frail. Without Beast Vassals, their combat abilities paled in comparison not only to other demons but even to human Attack Mages. That being said, Kojou doubted that transforming himself into a beast person or the like would let him oppose Shahryar Ren so late in the

game. He was at a complete stalemate.

“Also, there’s one more thing I really wanted to ask.”

Asagi stared at Kojou reproachfully as she continued her questions. He lifted his face with suspicion.

“What?”

“Why do you have to go that far to save Aurora?”

“Huh?” Kojou lowered his voice in apparent irritation. “Isn’t it obvious I have to save her? She’s being used by Shahryar Ren in my place, you know?”

“She’s the real Fourth Primogenitor, right? All you did was return her power to her and go back to being human. So why do you need to risk your life to go save her again?”

“Hey, Asagi...!”

Yaze addressed the programmer as though chiding her for her increasingly barbed tone, but she completely ignored him, pretending not to hear.

“Do you like her?”

“...Huh?”

Asagi’s question, lacking any logical connection, made Kojou drop his jaw and stiffen. Suddenly, all eyes fell upon him.

“W-wait a sec. What’s with those stares...? What do you mean, ‘Do I like Aurora?’”

“Oh, geez, you’re so indecisive, you klutz! I’m asking if you’ve fallen head over heels for her! Do you really plan on making Himeragi and everyone help you bring back the girl you’re in love with?”

Slam, went Asagi’s violent strike against the table. Her sudden reference to Yukina and the others left them bewildered.

“Um...ah...I am senpai’s watcher...so I do not really mind...”

“I—I don’t intend to get in Aiba or Yukii’s way, either...”

“‘Himeragi and everyone...’ Wait, you aren’t including me in this, are you...?”

Yui asked.

The Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency all started to squirm. “Oho,” went Yaze, watching with great interest. Kojou was the only one shaking his head like he had no idea what was going on.

“Er, are you seriously asking that? What does whether I’m in love with Aurora or not have to do with you girls...?”

“Augh, Kojou... You moron...!”

Yaze instantly paled and tried to cover his mouth. Yukina and the others’ horrified expressions froze in place.

“This guy...”

An unsettling *creak* echoed as Asagi clenched her back teeth.

Pouring her remaining coffee down her throat in a single gulp, she folded the laptop on the table, then slowly rose to her feet.

“I’m leaving.”

“Hey, Asagi?! Where are you planning on going? Your house isn’t in this domain, right?!”

“Shut up. Outta my way.”

When Yaze tried to give chase, Asagi violently kicked him down and headed out of the room. Despite this, he still went after her out of concern for his bullheaded childhood friend.

“What the heck’s up with her all of a sudden...?”

Kojou tilted his head in exasperation, still watching the door through which Asagi had left the room.

“Senpai...”

Yukina heaved a long, quiet sigh while gazing at the side of Kojou’s face.

Behind the Saikai Academy campus building, there was no sign of prying eyes as Yuiri called out sharply while wielding the silver spear. Or rather, she was trying to wield it, but the blade of the spear wouldn't unfold. It hadn't even budged.

Consequently, Yuiri looked like the perfect picture of a ditzzy cosplayer striking a dramatic pose with an oddly shaped stick in her hands.

"H-huh...?! It didn't activate. Why not?"

Cheeks reddening in embarrassment, Yuiri swung the lance once more, but the result was the same. Snowdrift Wolf really wasn't transforming.

"Let me borrow it, Yuiri. I'll give it a try."

Shio accepted the spear from her and examined it closely. She couldn't find any sort of switch, lever, or other movable parts upon its smooth, metallic surface. Apparently, it was set up to deploy on its own whenever its wielder sent spiritual energy into it. Shio's bow shared the same principle, so there was nothing to be particularly confused about, yet the spear refused to activate no matter how much energy she put into it.

"I'll ask just to make sure... Type Seven doesn't have a recognition system like the Type Six series, does it?"

A slightly wounded expression came over Shio as she returned the spear to Yukina, who awkwardly took it back.

"That is correct. It takes a considerable amount of spiritual energy to activate, and since it is nigh useless outside of anti-demon combat—"

"Even if someone steals it, the chance it'll be used for ill is pretty low?"

"Yes," went Yukina, nodding in response to Shio's comment.

Kojou was leaning against the wall of the school building, watching Yukina and the others with boredom.

It wasn't as if they were playing around. They were in the middle of a serious discussion of how to handle Snowdrift Wolf going forward. Snowdrift Wolf, one of the Lion King Agency's secret weapons known as Schneewaltzers, would no longer operate for Yukina, its current wielder. Her resonance with Snowdrift

Wolf had advanced to the point where she was becoming angelicized.

With Itogami Island in chaos, they did not have the luxury of leaving a powerful divine armament like Snowdrift Wolf an unusable toy. Consequently, Yukina had requested that Yuiri, a fellow Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, try using it instead.

“But it’s not activating? Maybe it really is damaged?”

Yuiiri grimaced in dismay as she prodded the inert spear with a fingertip.

“No... It should not be...”

Yukina posed as if she was readying Snowdrift Wolf for action. That instant, the metal shaft made a graceful sound as it slid, the main blade unsheathing as two more deployed to the right and left.

Yuiiri and Shio gawked so much that their eyes seemed ready to fall out of their sockets.

“Huh? Why...?!”

“Why can only Himeragi...?!”

“Perhaps it has picked up some strange quirks during the time I have used it?”

Yukina seemed rather uneasy as she checked the state of the spear.

“Come to think of it...the lance was busted once before Fake Himeragi fixed it, right?”

Kojou suddenly remembered that while watching the exchange between the girls.

A mysterious girl calling herself Reina had repaired Snowdrift Wolf with the alchemist Nina Adelard after it was destroyed in a battle against IX-4, an Unknown.

“Don’t tell me they put something in it that even we don’t know about...?”

“...At the time, Type Seven broke because it couldn’t withstand Yukii’s spiritual energy...so then maybe...”

Yuiiri grabbed Snowdrift Wolf, which was now back in standby, from Yukina and focused her thoughts as she quietly regulated her breathing. She then wove

a chant in a solemn voice.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!”

“Y-Yuiri?”

She gently danced before Shio’s surprised eyes, employing breathing and self-suggestion techniques to heighten her ritual energy to its maximum and pour it into the lance.

“Divine Blade of the Flaming Blood, Silver Dragon of the Sacred Feathers, emerge from the dark Abyss and strike down the devils before me!”

The instant Shio finished her dance, Snowdrift Wolf triggered. The three blades deployed, enveloped by the pale glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect.

“It activated...!”

Yukina breathed out in relief. Kojou spontaneously clapped. The expression on Shio’s face was grave rather than joyous, however.

“So it took Yuiri boosting her spiritual energy to finally get it to activate... Himeragi, just how reckless with your spiritual energy are you...?!”

“Well, I do not consider my actions particularly reckless, but...”

Struggling to respond, Yukina lowered her eyes slightly.

On her end, Yuiri’s cheeks reddened, her arms twitching as she continued to hold the spear up.

“I figured...it actually wasn’t broken, but actually using this in live combat might be a bit...much...”

Drained of strength, Yuiri put the spear down and broke into a coughing fit.

Both held Sword Shaman qualifications, so Yuiri hadn’t thought there would be that much of a difference between her and Yukina’s natural spiritual energy. The fact that Yuiri had been selected to temporarily act as Yukina’s substitute was proof enough.

Nevertheless, now that Snowdrift Wolf had been tuned to match someone as Faux-Angelicized as Yukina, it was virtually impossible for anyone besides her to use it. If Yuiri forced herself to continue wielding the spear, she would also

Faux-Angelicize as a side effect. The only way to avoid that was to become—

“The Fourth Primogenitor’s...Blood Vassal, huh...”

“Shio...?”

When Shio turned to Kojou with a serious look in her eyes, Yuiri called out to her in a questioning tone of voice. Shio gasped and shook her head in response.

“No, it’s nothing. It’s nothing at all. We’re stuck, though. If Himeragi can’t continue her mission, then maybe retrieving the Type Seven is the right thing to do, but...”

“If we can’t use it either way, best to leave it in Yukii’s hands, right?”

Shio and Yuiri put their faces close together, mulling it over in indecisive tones. This was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, after all. Greenhorns like Shio and Yuiri didn’t know what the right call was.

The pair continued brooding in silence until a single crow flew right in front of their eyes.

The bird circled around the surprised pair before landing on top of Kojou’s head. It wiggled a wing as if inviting Yukina closer. This obviously wasn’t the behavior of a wild animal.

“Ow... Those talons hurt! What’s up with this thing...?!”

“It is a *shikigami*! There is something like a letter on its leg...”

“So why did it have to perch on top of my head?!”

“I am sorry, senpai. Please hold still for a moment!”

Ignoring Kojou’s objections, Yukina undid stationery tied to the crow’s leg.

Its duty at an end, the familiar kicked off from Kojou’s head and sailed back into the sky. Its movements were so terrifyingly natural that it was hard to tell it apart from the real thing. It seemed to have been constructed with a technique far more precise than those with which Yukina and the others controlled their metal *shikigami*.

“A message...? From Koyomi Shizuka?!”

Yukina exclaimed this when she spread open the stationery the familiar had

brought.

Kojou peered at the letter from Yukina's side.

"That sure is a high school girl's handwriting... The phrasing, too..."

"That's probably to camouflage the message so that the secrets of the Lion King Agency don't get exposed if it's stolen."

"That's Lady Shizuka for you," purred Shio in admiration.

"Nah...I think it's more like she let the real girl slip out...," Kojou murmured offhandedly to himself.

He'd actually met her face-to-face, so he knew that Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, was in fact a young woman scarcely older than he was.

"Um, so what did Lady Shizuka say—?"

Yui asked Yukina this in a voice brimming with tension.

"That's..."

Pure bewilderment flashed across Yukina's eyes as she finished reading Koyomi's letter. When she handed the stationery to Yui and Shio, they tilted their heads as they read.

""Huh...?""

The two simultaneously let out gasps of surprise.

7

Kojou and Yukina were taking their familiar school commute back home.

Though they were concerned for Asagi, who'd left Saikai Academy; Shizuri, who'd no doubt been evacuated due to her injuries; and Nagisa and the others left at Tensou Academy, Kojou and Yukina had nearly hit the limits of their endurance. They were heading home to rest for the time being.

Their apartment building was in the Third Primogenitor's domain, but ironically, this made the area the safest place on Itogami Island at present. Now

that Kojou had lost his vampiric powers, he could move through her domain in the light of day like any ordinary civilian.

Walking at his side, Yukina carried a black guitar case over her shoulder like always. Of course, a certain silver spear was also folded inside the case.

“I’m glad she didn’t confiscate the lance.”

Kojou glanced at Yukina’s back as he spoke.

The letter Koyomi Shizuka had sent was actually a document with new orders for Yukina. Her mission was to continue observing Kojou. In the end, they had only Kojou’s subjective testimony that he’d relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, not objective evidence. Accordingly, he required further observation, which was grounds for her to remain his watcher.

If she was formally continuing her mission, there was no need to return the equipment she’d been granted. This was why Shio and Yui had returned to the Lion King Agency branch office without taking Snowdrift Wolf.

“I suppose I am as well. I have grown rather fond of Snowdrift Wolf, though I feel a little bad that it is useless in my hands.”

Yukina spoke with a somewhat conflicted expression. Kojou scratched his head, feeling vaguely responsible.

“Sorry, Himeragi. It’s my fault you can’t use it anymore.”

“It is nothing for you to feel bad about, senpai. This weapon was for killing you to begin with.”

“When you put it like that, then yeah, who cares...”

A pained expression came over Kojou. Yukina didn’t sound like she was joking in the slightest.

He’d heard straight from Yukina that she’d been given the right to instantly eliminate Kojou if she deemed him a threat. To be honest, the question of whether she still held that authority was weighing a bit on his mind now that Kojou wasn’t Fourth Primogenitor anymore.

“Besides, as you are now, senpai, a normal lance can impale you to death without need of the Divine Oscillation Effect.”

“Why are you assuming I’m gonna get impaled to death?! I haven’t done anything, so isn’t that a little weird?!”

“...I do not think it would be strange for you to be stabbed to death at any moment. Particularly if it’s from Aiba.”

Yukina glanced up at Kojou soberly. For whatever reason, Yukina had been sympathetic to Asagi ever since she’d stormed out of the room in anger.

Kojou made a sullen face as he arrived at the memory of what had happened just before and after that.

“Asagi, huh... I admit it’s no wonder she got angry back there.”

“Huh,” went Yukina, blinking as if someone had slapped her in the face.

“You understand why she’s upset?”

“Even I can tell that much. I just thought it’d be awkward for Asagi if I said it in front of everyone, so I kept my mouth shut.”

“I-is that so? You do have a point.”

Yukina nodded, still wearing an expression of surprise on her face. It seemed she found Kojou appreciating Asagi’s feelings quite atypical of him.

“I mean, of course Asagi’s unhappy about stuff. She’s busy with cleaning up after the Electoral War and getting Itogami Island back on its feet, so when I asked her to help save Avrora... I can understand why she’d wanna complain about me dumping extra work on her shoulders.”

“...Huh?”

Yukina’s face stiffened. Kojou didn’t notice her reaction as he nodded to himself, figuring he had to be right.

“I’d really like to help Asagi. I’ve got my hands full saving Avrora right now. It figures she’d get bent out of shape over me putting Avrora over her.”

“Um... Senpai, are you seriously saying Asagi is angry because you are being partial to Avrora?”

“Isn’t that what she meant when she asked if I’ve fallen in love with her?”

“I think she probably meant something else.”

Her voice filled with disappointment and reproach, Yukina replied emotionlessly.

Kojou exposed his teeth as if he was pouting.

“Why was she angry, then? It’s not like she’s jealous or anything.”

“No, what I mean is, why do you think she *would not* be jealous?”

“I mean, Asagi and Avrora are in completely different positions, right?”

When Kojou replied without missing a beat, Yukina stared squarely at him with confusion.

“Er... What do you mean by this...?”

“Avrora’s like a piece of my body or like a little sister I’m related to by blood.”

“...So you do not love her? In a...romantic sense.”

Yukina inquired about this in a small, tense voice.

Kojou sank into silent, serious thought for a time before finally shaking his head.

“That’s ’cause the only memories I have of being with her are fragments. To be honest, I don’t really know the answer.”

In contrast to the gravity of his words, Kojou’s tone was simple and frank. He’d already brooded enough over his loss of memories associated with Avrora. If he couldn’t come to an answer after all that, he didn’t think there was any point ruminating on it further.

“I get the impression she’s a high-maintenance little sister, though.”

When Kojou got that off his chest, Yukina bit her lip a little with a pitying look for a single instant. She then smiled in a way that seemed both slightly peevish and malicious.

“Senpai, given how you treat Nagisa, should I not take this as a confession of your burning love?”

“Wait a sec. How’d you land on that?”

“I am joking.”

Tee-hee, went Yukina as she giggled, immediately sighing a tiny bit.

“I think Aiba is worried about you, senpai. When she saw you insisting you would risk your life to save another girl, perhaps she felt irritated but also some kind of stirring deep inside her chest... Ah, um, this is mere speculation on my part.”

“So she got pissed I said I was gonna do something reckless? But I really am just a powerless civilian at the moment, so I wouldn’t even stand a chance against Asagi if she was fighting seriously...”

“If that is what you think, it is enough, senpai.”

At her wit’s end, Yukina lowered her shoulders. Kojou, of course, was a little put off as he stared back.

“Just to make things clear, even I get that me going to Nod to bring *Avrora* back is reckless. If someone else rescues her, that’s fine by me... If there *is* some do-gooder out there who fits the bill.”

“I believe there is no reason to be pessimistic about that.”

Yukina replied with composure about this.

“A situation where MAR can use the Fourth Primogenitor is an unmistakable threat to humankind, so there should be a fair number of people thinking of taking Miss *Avrora* back from President Ren’s clutches. Depending on the circumstances, however—”

“Chances are they’d try to destroy her instead of rescue her, huh?”

Kojou picked up where Yukina had trailed off.

“Yes,” replied Yukina, her face stiff.

Since the Fourth Primogenitor was an artificial vampire created by the Devas, it was highly likely that Shahryar Ren, a descendant of the Devas, possessed some means of controlling *Avrora*. Without knowing the fine details, it was only natural for people to think she should be destroyed rather than brought back alive and unharmed. In his current state, Kojou had no power to prevent that decision.

“I...really am powerless.”

He clenched his hand into a fist as he unwittingly let his true feelings slip.

Asagi had preeminent hacking skills and the power of the Priestess of Cain.

Yaze was the successor to a giant corporate conglomerate and held great influence as the chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

Yukina and her peers had combat abilities that put even those of demons to shame.

Compared to them, Kojou was helpless at present. Having failed to obtain the cooperation of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, the Lion King Agency, or Asagi, he couldn't even reach Nod, much less rescue Aurora. It ate at him. After a single night, there he was, longing to take back the power of the Fourth Primogenitor he'd found such a pain in the rear.

"—It will be all right."

Yukina gently wrapped her hands around Kojou's trembling fist. The softness of her touch made him lift his face in surprise.

"...Himeragi?"

"Let's rest...senpai. Going from vampire to human must have put your body under a great deal of stress. You won't think of anything wiped out like this."

"Er...but there's not much time until the gate to Nod ope—"

"So let's take a breather and come up with a plan later. You are not immortal anymore, senpai. You must conserve what physical energy you can."

"...I see... Guess you're right."

Kojou gave in and accepted Yukina's proposal. Now that he thought about it, he had no recollection of getting any rest since arriving back on Itogami Island, save for when he'd exhausted his strength and collapsed. Just as Yukina had said, the right course of action was undoubtedly conserving his energy for now. Even if there was no time to spare, there was nothing to be gained from collapsing at a crucial moment.

Fortunately, the city seemed peaceful, and public transportation was running as usual again. On top of the Electoral War dying down, all the belligerent demons were gathered around Keystone Gate.

Their apartment building hadn't sustained any visible damage. It looked the same as it had back when Kojou and Yukina left on their trip.

After disposing of the flyers clogging their mailboxes, they went into the lobby and got on the elevator. When they arrived at the seventh floor, Yukina suddenly came to a standstill and grabbed Kojou's wrist.

"—Senpai."

"Himeragi? Something wrong?"

Kojou glanced back with a questioning look.

All expression had vanished from Yukina's face; she looked like a beautiful doll as she glared at the Akatsuki residence. Suppressing her aura like a predator nimbly hunting its prey, she addressed Kojou in a hushed voice.

"I sense people in your apartment, senpai—"

"Not...my parents, then?"

The scent of hot butter flowing out from the ventilation fan brought a guarded expression over Kojou, too. Both his parents, the legal guardians of the Akatsuki household, had abysmal domestic skills. The fact that someone was trying to cook a proper meal made it clear this was another person. He thought the odds that this was a robbery were pretty low, but given the commotion of the Electoral War, it wouldn't be too far-fetched if a squatter had settled into the unoccupied Akatsuki residence.

If that was the case, he could only say that this stranger had atrocious luck. After all, Kojou had a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency on his side, a woman who could beat down a beast person with her bare hands.

Kojou and Yukina traded glances. They split to the right and left of the front entrance, preparing to breach the apartment. Kojou was to open the door, after which Yukina would charge inside.

The front door had been carelessly left unlocked. This made Kojou even more suspicious that he had an intruder on his hands.

Silently nodding to each other, Kojou opened the door. Yukina kept her back against the wall as she peered at the state of things inside when—

“Ah, Yukina? And Kojou, too. Welcome back!”

Nagisa popped her head out in response to the sound of the opening, waving and looking mystified as she stared at Kojou’s and Yukina’s strange poses.

“Nagisa...?!”

Kojou stared back in bewilderment at Nagisa in her apron.

He’d heard from Yukina and the others that she was okay, but it had been days since he’d seen her safe and sound in the flesh—this was the first time he’d laid eyes on her since getting wrapped up in the Electoral War. Nagisa was supposed to be under the protection of the Tensou Academy Domain, so he didn’t understand why she was home. He felt like he was seeing a ghost.

Kojou slipped off his shoes and wobbled over to her as if making sure she was really there.

“Nagisa... Is that really you, Nagisa? I’m...so glad you’re safe!”

“Wait a se... Kojou, what’s wrong with you? Making such a big deal out of... Hold on—is there something different about you?”

When Kojou hugged her with visible relief, Nagisa patted him on the head as if to say, *There you go again*. Yukina glared at Kojou’s backside, her deep exhale bearing a message of *You Siskon, you*.

“Don’t worry—I’m fine. I had really dependable bodyguards with me.”

“...Bodyguards?”

His little sister’s unexpected words threw Kojou off.

“Yeah. They said they had something to talk to you about, so they’ve been waiting here all this time.”

Nagisa flashed him a proud little smile and shifted her gaze to the living room behind her.

That was when Kojou finally realized there were people other than her in the living room. Nagisa had been in the kitchen baking confections for the guests.

“Bodyguards? But who would...?”

Kojou cocked his head and headed toward the living room. Yukina followed

right behind him.

The people on the sofa noticed Kojou and company and waved at them. They were a couple consisting of a young man and woman.

The former was a tall man with a tight and toned physique. The latter was a gorgeous woman with red hair that bordered on blond—

“Huh?! Wait, why are you two...?”

“Y-you are...”

Kojou and Yukina were struck senseless by the sight of guests so terribly out of place. In fact, the scene was so shocking that they didn’t get frightened or go on guard. They were simply surprised out of their wits.

“Heya. So we meet again, boy.”

Glancing back at the agape Kojou and Yukina with vivid amusement, the man waved a hand like they were old friends.

As far as the public was concerned, this was the genuine World’s Mightiest Vampire.

He was the Lost Warlord, First Primogenitor, and liege of the dominion known as the Warlord’s Empire.

Ki Juranbarada—this was the name of the tall man who was Kojou’s unexpected guest.



CHAPTER TWO
BLACK BEAST
VASSALS

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BLACK BEAST VASSALS

1

“See you later, Kojou. Take care of him, Yukina.”

Changed into her uniform, Nagisa waved to Kojou and Yukina before busily heading out. She’d said she was heading to Saikai Academy to meet Minami and Sakura. Nagisa hadn’t been able to see her friends since returning to her home country. Her classmates’ condition must have been weighing on her mind.

“No need to worry about your little sis. The Chaos Zone hag has no reason to lay a hand on that girl, and I assigned Aradahl as her escort just to be on the safe side.”

For some reason, Ki Juranbarada seemed amused by the worried stare with which Kojou had watched Nagisa go as he spoke.

Kojou glared at him with blatant wariness.

“Why are you going that far for Nagisa?”

“Because she’s so cute. I love her!”

It was Zana who replied to Kojou’s question. She was hugging the cushion on her lap in Nagisa’s stead, rubbing her cheek against it pretty hard. *That ain’t a reason*, thought Kojou with a twist of his lips, but of course he lacked the courage to actually say that out loud.

“Well, have a seat. Your little sis’s cookies are pretty tasty stuff.”

Ki nibbled on some sweets as he leaned on the couch with a relaxed demeanor. From the way he was reaching for one cookie after another, his words did not seem to be mere flattery. Given he was the sovereign of a Dominion, one would not assume he’d scarf down any old meal, but there was

a certain ramen maniac prince as a precedent. Maybe simple confections like this felt unexpectedly fresh to him, not that Kojou really cared either way.

“Why the hell do you seem more at home than I do...?”

Kojou sighed in annoyance as he sat down opposite Ki.

Now that he'd lost the power of a primogenitor, maybe he wasn't in any position to speak to the First Primogenitor on equal terms, but they were interacting normally regardless. He got the impression Ki wanted it that way.

“First, let me say my thanks. Congratulations on putting the spirits of the departed to rest.”

A satisfied smile came over Ki as he moved his face closer to Kojou.

He looked back at the First Primogenitor without any timidity whatsoever.

“By spirits of the departed, do you mean The Blood?”

“That's right,” Ki affirmed bluntly.

“We couldn't wipe him out ourselves because the whole pretext for us coming to this island was to be guests in the Electoral War. I'm sure he wished to die at the hands of the Fourth Primogenitor anyway.”

“...So what the hell was up with Zana getting in our way? If she hadn't done that, Shahryar Ren wouldn't have taken Avrora...!”

Kojou turned his gaze toward Zana. She grinned with narrowed eyes.

Since Zana had slowed Yukina and Sayaka down, Kojou had needed to fight The Blood all on his own. This resulted in a prolonged engagement that wore the girls down so much they hadn't been able to stop Shahryar Ren from closing in. Kojou had good reason to glare at her.

Ki, on the other hand, went “hmm” as he stroked his chin.

“I wonder about that. If Zana hadn't been there, that rich bastard might not have let you walk away at all.”

“—Are you trying to say she pretended to help The Blood but was really protecting us instead?”

Kojou gave both vampires a suspicious stare. Though the claim struck him as

self-serving, after calmly considering it for a moment, he couldn't say for certain the man was just making it up.

Shahryar Ren hadn't shown his face when Zana Lashka was fighting with Yukina and Sayaka in spite of the fact that he would have caught Kojou and the others completely by surprise if he had done so.

"Of course, that wasn't the only reason. I genuinely wanted to fight two cute girls, on top of other important business."

Zana gave Kojou and Yukina a sexy wink. Her slippery attitude annoyed Kojou a little.

"Business?"

"That's what we came to talk to you about today, boy. Wanna make a deal with me?"

Ki Juranbarada reseated himself deeper into the sofa with a generous puff of his chest. That alone was enough to strike Kojou with the sense he was seated upon a regal throne. He felt like he was learning all over again that this man was the primogenitor who reigned supreme over the Warlord's Empire.

A little overwhelmed, Kojou shook his head as he gave a self-deprecating reply.

"Hold on a sec. I'm not the Fourth Primogenitor anymore. Hell, I'm not even a demon, just a plain old human being. I'm not in any position to make a deal with the ruler of a Dominion."

"I suppose not. Who'd have thought you'd give up the abilities of the World's Mightiest Vampire that easily? Even I couldn't see that one coming. You got me good."

"I was really surprised."

Kojou thought that would have soured Ki's mood, but instead he nodded with what seemed to be genuine praise. Zana smiled with amusement. Kojou grimaced as he took in their reactions.

"You know all that, and you *still* want to make a deal with me?"

"You have a point. You finally went back to being a normal human, so you can

back out and do whatever you like. You've both amused us plenty enough as it is."

Ki made a strained smile. Kojou felt like there was a sharp, aggressive glint coming from the back of his eyes.

"But if you want to save Dodekatos, I'll lend you a hand. I'll give you the power to go to Nod and face off against that rich bastard."

Hrk, went the sound of Kojou's throat. Ki was tempting Kojou with the words he wanted to hear most.

When Kojou subconsciously leaned forward, Yukina instantly reached her arm across his chest to stop him.

"This is what you meant by a deal?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Yukina had checked out of an abundance of caution. Ki nodded back with a daring look on his face.

"And how would we repay you?"

"I want to avoid Nod becoming a threat to the world on this side. I want it so no nation or organization can lay a hand on the place, not just MAR."

"So we won't just bring Avrora back but send all of MAR packing, too?"

Kojou lifted his brows in surprise.

Ki seemed to be saying he wanted to give Kojou the power to save Avrora and have him use it to stop Shahryar Ren's scheme in its tracks. He felt like this was Ki using him, but it was a far better deal than any he could have imagined. After all, snatching Avrora back meant clashing with MAR Inc.'s units either way.

"MAR's not necessarily your only foe. This agreement covers any and all nations and forces trying to use Nod for themselves. If worse comes to worse, I'd rather you lay waste to the city itself."

"...Why place that duty upon senpai's shoulders? Could you not order your Warlord's Empire subordinates to take care of it...?"

Yukina pressed further with even greater care. It was an impolite question to

ask, but Ki didn't take it badly whatsoever as he shook his head with apparent regret.

"I'd do that if I could. Things would be a lot simpler if I could blow Nod away myself, but there's a reason my hands are tied."

"A reason... Meaning?"

"You can't use Beast Vassals in Nod."

"Huh?"

Zana Lashka's reply in her king's stead left Yukina wide-eyed and perplexed.

"Hmph," went Ki's curt snort.

"Yep, that's how it is. Beast Vassals are summoned creatures from another world, after all. But over in the world of Nod, the host vampire is an anomaly. An already unstable existence summoning an even less stable Beast Vassal is simply a bridge too far...with one narrow exception."

"Exception...?"

Yukina gasped and looked at Kojou.

Ki leered, lifting his lips to reveal his sharp canine teeth.

"There's one, right? The artificial vampire made for the express purpose of sending it into Nod."

"You don't mean...the Fourth Primogenitor?"

Kojou's face stiffened. Thanks to Ki's detailed explanation, even someone as ill-versed in demonic affairs as Kojou could catch the drift. After all, he'd been that artificial vampire himself until a few short hours prior.

"That's right. The Fourth Primogenitor, the god-killing weapon developed to destroy Cain the Sinful God, can use Beast Vassals even in Nod. That's what it was made for. After all, those Beast Vassals were birthed there by feeding them the grudges of Devas."

Ki squinted with distaste. "I see," Kojou murmured to himself.

"So that's why Shahryar Ren took Avrora with him..."

The Fourth Primogenitor's demonic energy was certainly vast, but that wasn't to say comparable power sources didn't exist. Spiritual reactors, dragon lines, or even ancient dragons—you could use any of them to simply open a gate to Nod.

Shahryar Ren, however, had gone through the onerous process of the Electoral War in order to obtain the Fourth Primogenitor specifically. This was because he knew the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals were the key to invading the city.

“The artificial vampire known as the Fourth Primogenitor was designed with all kinds of safety features to keep it from harming its Deva creators. One of these was the aggressive mock personality, Root Mode. Another was called Logic Bomb and was implemented to protect its secrets, and there also seems to be a Ransom Mode, which completely deprives the vampire of free will so it can be used as a pure demonic energy generator.”

Ki counted on his fingers as he continued his explanation.

Kojou was deeply familiar with the danger posed by Root—the personality governing the Fourth Primogenitor's weapon side. On top of that, the presence of Logic Bomb suggested there were additional functions hidden within the Fourth Primogenitor. What Ki referred to as Ransom Mode seemed to be another one of these features.

And Shahryar Ren had used it to control Avrora and draw demonic energy out of her.

“Twisted or not, that rich bastard is still a descendant of the Devas. It's not strange that he'd be aware of that function. And with it, he can use the demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor in Nod, a place you shouldn't be able to summon Beast Vassals at all. I take it you can imagine what a bad situation this is?”

Kojou nodded without a word. An unlimited release of the Fourth Primogenitor's demonic power was said to be on par with an army or perhaps a large-scale natural disaster. So long as Shahryar Ren remained in Nod and could wield that destructive power without anyone to challenge him, he was invincible.

“So me going to Nod...will change this somehow?”

“There’s no guarantee, but I’ll give you a chance at the very least.”

Ki gazed at Kojou as if to test him.

Kojou casually shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“Got it... I’ll take your deal.”

“—Senpai! Just like that...!”

Yukina seemed unnerved as she tried to admonish Kojou, but he had no intention of reconsidering. The only way he could turn things around was to accept Ki’s deal.

“Good answer.”

Ki smiled with satisfaction when he saw that Kojou had made up his mind. Just then, he slapped his forehead like he’d forgotten something important.

“Ahhh, sorry. I forgot to mention this, but this agreement comes with a condition.”

“Condition?”

What now? Kojou thought, scowling. An atypically serious expression came over Ki as he lowered his voice, almost like he was teasing Kojou.

“You need Blood Servants. Since you’re not a vampire right now, you’ll need them to make up the difference. Use whatever term you like, but you need spirit mediums ready to offer their fates to you.”

“Blood...Servants?”

Kojou murmured this in a small voice as he unwittingly glanced at the side of Yukina’s face. She was touching the ring on her left ring finger, probably subconsciously.

Even if it was an emergency measure to avert a situation of life and death, Yukina had technically become Kojou’s Blood Servant. That pact was no longer effective now that he had relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, but even so, his mind first went to her when Blood Servants were brought up.

When Yukina looked at Kojou, he was anxious about how she would react. *If you insist, I would be willing to assist*, her expression seemed to say.

Ki, though, calmly continued without bothering to appreciate the delicate exchange between the two.

“Right, right. It’ll take twelve at minimum.”

“T-twelve...?!”

“Whaaat...?!”

Kojou and Yukina raised blunt, incredulous voices. Ki looked back at their surprised faces as if mystified.

“You can handle that?”

“No way in hell I can! How the heck did you come up with that crazy number...!”

“Oh, really? Too bad, boy. I kinda liked you.”

Ki sighed with what seemed like genuine dejection as he made a tiny, desolate shake of his head. Beside him, Zana Lashka rose up without a sound, then went around to Kojou opposite from Yukina.

When she sat down on the same sofa, Zana cuddled up to Kojou so that her ample breasts pressed against him.

“Uh...?”

Enveloped by her sensual, fruit-scented perfume, Kojou was practically paralyzed. Zana beheld him with her gemstone-like eyes as she smiled teasingly.

“Sorry about this.”

“Huh...?”

The sensation of her soft lips pressed against his made the inside of Kojou’s head go blank. Her captivating tongue entwined with his own, bringing with it a strange, undefinable pleasure. His brain was melting down.



“M-Miss Zana?! Wh-what are you...?!”

When Yukina saw Kojou’s and Zana’s tongues intermingle, she rose in fury. Her face was pale, and her eyes were bloodshot, and she was so enraged she could barely get a word out. It had been a long time since Kojou had seen her that incensed.

As if putting on a show for Yukina, Zana sucked on Kojou’s lips a little and licked them, then followed that up with a cruel leer. Yukina’s expression grew even angrier when she realized that something was coursing from Zana deep down into Kojou’s throat. Robbed of his bodily freedom, he could do nothing but swallow.

Her objective accomplished, Zana released Kojou with what seemed like slight lingering regret, licking her own moist lips.

“Why...did you do...something like...?”

Kojou groaned as Zana thrust him away. Fresh blood was trickling from his lips.

Deep crimson oozed and spread from where the silver blade had impaled his chest. Zana had unhesitatingly stabbed him in the left side of his chest with the large knife she’d held in her right hand.

2

Zana pulled out the weapon without any fanfare, a dagger whose warped shape evoked a human skull.

Fresh blood gushed out of Kojou’s chest wound as he slowly fell forward. As Yukina watched in a daze, one could almost hear the sound of something snapping inside of her.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

A scream like that of a wild beast surged out of Yukina’s throat as she gave in to her anger and attacked Zana.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry—I might have gone a little too far with the...free...bie...?! ”

Wuhhh?!”

Zana was diverting Yukina’s attacks with ease when her expression hardened from surprise. The flow of Yukina’s movements were fading in and out like film being cut from a reel as she launched lethal blunt attacks with impossible speed. Her strikes were coming from outside time, a flurry of blows using the right of absolute initiative.

“No way—this is bad! This girl might be kinda dangerous when she flips her lid!”

Zana couldn’t keep up with the overwhelming speed of the punches Yukina was dishing out. When she instantly raised both arms in defense, Yukina’s explosive ritual energy blew her guard asunder. She attacked Zana with a flurry of merciless thrusting kicks. Unable to keep up with the blows, the vampire woman went flying.

“Ow, ow, ow...!”

“Idiot, you took it too far when you stuck your tongue in.”

Ki swiftly moved around, catching Zana before she could collide with the wall. “Awww,” went Zana, pouting in dismay. “I mean, if it’s going to be his *last one*, I thought I’d give him a good memory... Right?”

“Don’t stomp on the pure hearts of kids going through puberty.”

Ki sighed out of apparent sympathy for Kojou and tossed the pouting woman to the floor. Apparently, it didn’t faze him that his own Blood Servant had kissed Kojou. After spending so many years together, he probably regarded someone like Kojou along the lines of a kindergartner or a pet dog or cat.

“Senpai! Please hang on, senpai!”

Yukina forgot all about pursuing Zana and tried to treat the curled-up Kojou, but with her current treatment ritual spell abilities, there was no way she could remedy someone’s punctured heart. She couldn’t stop the bleeding, let alone close the wound.

“Gu...oa...”

An agonized cry trickled out of Kojou’s mouth. Yukina’s face twisted in despair

before immediately changing to shock. Just when she assumed it was only a matter of time before he bled out, something strange happened to his body.

“The wound is... But how?!”

Yukina wore a bewildered expression. The gash in Kojou’s chest had begun to repair itself even as she watched. His completely destroyed heart had regenerated, his severed blood vessels were linking back together, and the deep hole punched through flesh and sinew was filling up.

This incredible healing—no, regeneration—was impossible for a demon body, let alone human flesh and blood. It was a regenerative ability on par with the unrestricted immortality of the vampire primogenitors.

“Told you that I’d give him the power to go up against Shahryar Ren.”

Ki spoke with the tone of an innocent child.

Yukina pressed close to the curled-up Kojou and glared up at Ki with an aggressive look in her eyes.

“Just what did you do to Akatsuki-senpai...?”

“I fed the boy Beast Vassals—by force, as it were.”

Ki calmly spoke the words.

“Beast...Vassals...?”

“You get vampiric abilities by eating Beast Vassals. The thing our kind calls cannibalism allows you to steal the abilities of vampires you consume.”

“As he is now, there is no way senpai could do such a—”

“You wouldn’t think. A normal human can’t cannibalize a vampire. They’re not even the same species to begin with, see.”

Ki nodded with a completely serious look before breaking out into a malicious leer.

“Since when did he become a normal human, though?”

“...Eh? Huh?”

“Kojou Akatsuki gave up the right to rule the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast

Vassals...*and nothing more*. He didn't hand back the curse of immortality. In fact, I'm pretty damn sure the eternal life from the gods themselves is still inscribed in his body. That's because Dodekatos's—no, Hektos's—body was built as a vampire to begin with.”

“Ah...”

Yukina's eyes wavered weakly. *So that's it*, thought Kojou, clicking his tongue amid his anguish.

Once upon a time, Aurora the Twelfth had passed her own power on to Kojou, turning him into the Fourth Primogenitor. The price she'd paid was the loss of her vampiric powers and immortality. It was said that the instant she was released from its prison of ice, that body would turn to ash and vanish.

That's why Kojou had thought it was the same deal this time around in reverse: Kojou would relinquish his vampire powers and revert to his original human form. But that wasn't the case, for there was a fundamental difference between what had happened at Keystone Gate and the moment when he'd become the Fourth Primogenitor.

Unlike Kojou, who was human to begin with, Aurora's current body—Hektos's former body—was vampiric from the start. Kojou hadn't changed her into a vampire. Aurora already had a vampire body, so there was no need for him to pass the curse of immortality to her.

The curse of immortality that made vampires what they were clung to Kojou's flesh and blood even now. Relinquishing his Beast Vassals, his source of demonic energy, had made it seem like he'd become human again, but that was all. Obtaining his familiars once more would cause Kojou to regain his true vampiric nature. If this was not the case, he'd surely have lost his life the instant Zana plunged her knife into his heart.

“That being said, whether the boy can tame the Beast Vassals I gave him is a different question entirely. These are Beast Vassals with power on par with the Fourth Primogenitor's twelve, so it won't be easy, you know?”

Kojou moaned in pain as Ki looked down at him and spoke tauntingly.

His statement made Yukina draw in her breath.

“Beast Vassals on par with the Fourth Primogenitor’s...? Just where did you find such...?”

Yukina turned her gaze toward Zana, who averted her eyes with feigned innocence. Her behavior made Kojou and Yukina understand exactly what she’d done.

There were only two types of beings in the entire world with Beast Vassals equal in power to those of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire. These were the *real primogenitors*, Ki included, and the prototype Fourth Primogenitor who no longer existed—in other words, The Blood.

“So that’s it... You showed up there at Keystone Gate when I was fighting The Blood to get a hold of his Beast Vassals...”

Kojou murmured this in a fragmented, anguished voice.

Zana Lashka had suddenly appeared at the height of Kojou’s fight against The Blood, keeping Yukina and Sayaka at bay throughout. Once The Blood dissipated, she’d vanished from sight without a word.

Now they understood what had motivated her mysterious deeds. She hadn’t been there to lend The Blood a hand. Rather, Zana’s objective was to snatch The Blood’s Beast Vassals away.

“Hee-hee, you got it.”

Zana cutely stuck out her tongue without the slightest shred of guilt. Hovering atop it were geometrical markings resembling a magic circle. The pattern’s pale glow greatly resembled the Divine Oscillation Effect of Snowdrift Wolf.

“I temporarily sealed and preserved the Beast Vassals that should have dissipated along with their host, Kenon. You should thank me while you still have your sense of self.”

Zana charmingly licked her lips. She’d used the magic inscribed on her tongue to send the Beast Vassals coursing into Kojou’s body. Sealing and preserving Beast Vassals was not something any normal magic user could do, but Zana was a Blood Servant of the First Primogenitor. She’d tapped into Ki’s inexhaustible supply of demonic energy to overcome the problem with brute force.

“What do you mean?” Kojou asked, glaring at Zana. It didn’t sound like she was threatening him but rather warning him of an inevitable future development.

“I’m saying, now that you’re little different from a human being, do you really have the power to make twelve Beast Vassals serve you?”

Ki grandly shook his head as if pitying Kojou.

“Zana’s blood will protect your flesh for a little while, but it ain’t gonna last for long. Not when you’re not even a full vampire.”

“Are you saying Kojou needs twelve Blood Servants to hold the Beast Vassals in check?”

Yukina looked at Ki as if she’d just realized something. The Blood had twelve Beast Vassals, and Ki had talked about a dozen Blood Servants—she didn’t think he’d just picked the number out of the air.

“One per Beast Vassal. He should be able to tame those Beast Vassals if he has twelve spirit mediums on your level. Am I wrong, Miss Sword Shaman?”

Ki spoke as though he were saying the obvious. Yukina bit her lip without a word.

The First Primogenitor’s calculations were very crude, but they weren’t completely groundless. After all, there was the case of Nagisa Akatsuki, who’d kept a Beast Vassal sealed even after it had possessed her. But Nagisa had only been able to work miracles because she was an absurdly powerful spirit medium, and even then, the act had whittled away at her life force. If asked if she could manage the same, even Yukina couldn’t immediately reply with a yes. Assembling twelve spirit mediums of a class equal to hers was a task so far beyond unreasonable that it bordered on hopeless.

“This is for you.”

When Yukina fell silent, Zana tossed the dagger she’d been holding toward the girl. It was the silver hunting knife that had pierced Kojou’s heart.

The instant it left Zana’s hands, however, the blade’s contours seemed to melt and contort. Though it was still composed of gleaming silver metal, it had

transformed into a beautiful chain roughly the length of a necklace.

“Alchemy...?!”

Yukina was shocked as she caught the chain. Kojou’s face twitched with surprise as well.

Zana didn’t show any sign of boasting, but turning a knife into a chain in a single second was frighteningly high-end alchemy. Her close-combat abilities had been enough to overwhelm both Yukina and Sayaka, yet she’d achieved a high level of alchemical mastery; both Yukina and Kojou felt as though the unfathomable might of the First Primogenitor’s Blood Servants were being rubbed in their faces all over again.

“It seals Kojou Akatsuki’s raw flesh and bone fragments to serve as a catalyst, no doubt the same materials as in the ring you wear. If you ask a high-level alchemist nicely, you can have it changed to whatever form you like. Make it as cute as you can.”

Zana pointed at the chain in Yukina’s hands, grinning as she explained.

The necklace Zana had created had eleven links. *Give those catalysts equal to Yukina’s ring out to eleven people* was the subtext.

“And hey, if you don’t wanna gather any Blood Servants, that’s cool with me. Your Beast Vassals can blow away this little artificial island real easy if they go berserk. Without Itogami Island, the gate will vanish, and the guys who went to Nod won’t be able to make it back here. It’ll be a little more boring, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

Ki made a deliberate shrug of his shoulders as he curved his lips into a ferocious smile.

The fact that he’d opted to implant the Beast Vassals into Kojou by force made it clear his words were no empty threat. The man was genuinely fine with Itogami Island being wiped off the map. If he thought it was necessary, no doubt he’d do it himself without any hesitation whatsoever.

He’d gone through the trouble of capturing The Blood’s Beast Vassals to give Kojou this chance purely because it was more interesting this way.

“I won’t let you lay a finger on this island.”

Kojou spoke in a low, grating voice. “Oho,” said Ki, dubiously raising his eyebrows.

Kojou ferociously bared his teeth as he defied the sense of regality coming from the man before him. The hazy demonic energy radiating from his body gave off black sparks resembling static electricity.

“I’m grateful for the power you gave me, but your job’s done. From here on out, you just shut up and watch while I go smack Shahryar Ren out of Nod just like we agreed.”

“Fine by me, boy. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Ki received Kojou’s belligerent gaze with a satisfied nod.

With nimbleness that belied his body weight, Ki stood tall, scooping Zana up in the process. Cutting across the room, he let himself out onto the veranda. The Akatsuki residence was on the seventh floor of the apartment building. Kojou and Yukina’s hair swayed in the ocean breeze blowing in through the open window.

“Claw and scrape, Kojou Akatsuki. I pray we will meet again.”

Bathed in dazzling sunrays, Ki and Zana’s contours swayed like a mirage and faded.

The First Primogenitor and his Blood Servant were turning into mist, melting into the noonday sky.

Kojou and Yukina watched this without a word. They knew trying to stop the pair was futile. Ki and Zana were neither friends nor allies.

“Bye-bye,” said Zana’s receding voice with a laugh. Finally, they completely vanished from sight.

That instant, the wounded Kojou collapsed on the spot, seemingly depleted of all strength. Yukina let out a sharp yelp.

“Is it really all right for you to not sleep?”

A worried look passed over Yukina’s face as she addressed Kojou, who was tottering as the midday sun poured down upon him. The two were walking on a coastal path about ten minutes from their apartment building. There were no prominent buildings in sight; the only thing in front of them was a deserted artificial isle undergoing expansion.

“It’s not like I can sleep smack-dab in the middle of a residential district. There’s no telling when the Beast Vassals are gonna start going haywire...”

Kojou pressed his right hand to his chest as he gave that forlorn reply. The wound Zana had left when she plunged the knife into him had closed, but his physical condition was only getting worse. Additionally, the strange sensation he felt—akin to magma coursing through his veins—was growing stronger with time.

Kojou’s body was trying to reject the foreign substances poured into it. In other words, the twelve black Beast Vassals left behind by The Blood were raging around, demanding he let them out.

For the time being, Kojou was just managing to keep them at bay, probably due to the seal Zana had left behind, but he didn’t know how long that would hold. He couldn’t even conceive of how much damage they’d do if they broke from his control and began going on a rampage. That was why he’d relocated to as remote a place as possible, small comfort that it was.

“I sent a *shikigami* to Master. Aid shall come soon enough. Can you contact Aiba?”

Yukina spoke in a serious tone as she lent Kojou her shoulder. He shook his head in response, seemingly mocking himself as he took the remnants of what used to be a smartphone from the pockets of his parka.

“If I knew this was gonna happen, I’d at least have gotten a spare phone.”

Maybe it was the fight with The Blood, maybe it was damage sustained from combat prior to that, but Kojou’s smartphone had long been damaged past the point of usability. The screen and its contents were in tatters. Even if it had been physically whole, no doubt its batteries would have been dry either way.

He hadn't had any chance to charge his phone since getting caught up in the Electoral War. Of course, he could use the phone in his apartment, but Kojou wasn't diligent enough to have memorized Asagi's contact information.

"How is your physical condition?"

Yukina had sighed once to get her spirits back in order before asking this of Kojou. He listlessly shook his head.

"Figures I wouldn't be in tip-top shape. To be honest, I'm not really sure how I'm still alive."

It had only been one short hour since Zana had stabbed him in the chest with a knife, forcing the Beast Vassals of his onetime foe into his system. If anything, it'd be far crazier if he could have shrugged all that off.

"More to the point," said Kojou, glancing back at Yukina. "What do you think of what the First Primogenitor said back there? I mean, about vampire power still being left in me?"

"It adds up at the very least. If it is a curse of the gods that truly makes up a vampire—vampiric factors, if you will—then the current Aurora certainly should have inherited hers from Miss Hektos rather than you."

"So it wouldn't be weird if the factors Aurora handed down are still inside me, then..."

Kojou nodded. It was the answer he'd expected.

Aurora had been born not as a demon but as an artificial vampire, probably created along the same lines as a homunculus. In other words, her vampiric factors had been implanted after the fact. That was what had enabled her to hand them to Kojou, which was otherwise impossible. Moreover, it seemed that the factors she'd given Kojou were still right there inside of him.

"So the problem is whether the factors or whatever still in me can keep The Blood's Beast Vassals at bay, huh?"

"That's..."

Yukina lowered her eyes a little as she hesitated. Kojou wasn't hanging on her answer because the reply to his question was obvious. It was impossible for him

to control The Blood's Beast Vassals.

After all, it had taken over half a year for him to get the Beast Vassals he'd inherited from Aurora into usable condition. Considering that, he didn't think he could immediately do the same with a fresh batch of twelve. On top of that, Kojou had been locked in mortal combat with the Beast Vassals' prior host a mere half a day earlier.

Standing beside Kojou as he took in the hopelessness of the situation, Yukina mulled something over. She then tugged on the sleeve of Kojou's parka.

"Um, ah... Senpai, come with me for a moment."

"Himeragi...?"

A questioning look came over Kojou's face as he went with Yukina down to the shore. Here, the gigafloat's foundation was bare. This was a desolate artificial coastline still in mid-construction.

Concealing them in the shadow of a breakwater, Yukina made sure no one else was in sight before undoing the ribbon on her chest. She proceeded to unbutton her school uniform, revealing her light pastel-colored bra.

"Wh-what do you think?"

Yukina's cheeks ran bright red as she inquired with upturned eyes. Kojou gazed at her strange, sudden pose with a stunned expression.

"Think...? Ahhh... Mm, I think it's cute. Looks pretty good on you, I guess?"

Even as his own voice went somewhat shrill, Kojou strenuously picked the most harmless words he could muster. Yukina apparently hadn't anticipated his reply based on how her eyes widened with some degree of confusion.

"L-looks good on... Just what are you speaking about?!"

"Hey, you're the one who showed me your bra out of the blue?!"

"I—I am not referring to that! I am trying to say it is fine to drink my blood!"

Yukina covered up her exposed breasts with both hands and angrily shouted at him for some reason. *You're the one who showed them to me*, thought Kojou as he gazed up at the sky.

“Ahhh, that...”

“Wh-what? Are you saying I am no longer a worthy object of your vampiric desires?!”

“No, it’s not that. It ain’t that at all. Look.”

Kojou put a finger to his own lips and pulled them straight to the side. His exposed canine teeth were those of a normal human; they weren’t peculiar in the slightest.

“I don’t know much about this factor stuff, but right now, I’m closer to a normal human being than a vampire, so I don’t think vampiric urges are gonna happen to begin with.”

“Ah...”

Yukina was stunned in the face of Kojou’s atypically sensible assertion. Her cheeks reddened further as her delicate shoulders bashfully trembled.

“Th-then why did I have to do something so embarrassing...?”

Covering her face with both hands, Yukina hunched her back like she was despondent. The tips of her ears poking through her hair were deep crimson in the sun.

Kojou somehow felt responsible for this as he gazed at the guitar case on her back. He knitted his brows before suddenly realizing that something was odd.

“...Weird.”

“W-weird?! So you really don’t think my underwear looks good on me?”

Yukina turned back toward Kojou with a forceful glare. *How’d it turn into that?* thought Kojou with a sigh.

“Not that. I mean this Blood Servant talk!”

“Eh?”

“That First Primogenitor geezer said I’ll be able to tame The Blood’s Beast Vassals if I get twelve Blood Servants together, right?”

“Yes.”

“But if I can’t drink blood right now, how am I supposed to get more of them?”

“Ah...”

Yukina’s expression hardened when she realized what Kojou was actually worried about.

To create a Blood Servant, a vampire needed to open a powerful, tangible spiritual pathway between master and servant. Blood and flesh were the catalysts for this. The servant offered the vampire her blood, and in recompense, the vampire master-to-be granted her a piece of his flesh.

The silver-colored chain Zana had provided her functioned as a substitute for Kojou’s body. If fashioned into something that was always against the wearer’s flesh, like a ring, it would serve well enough as a magical catalyst.

After that, Kojou could complete the spiritual pathway by drinking his new servant’s blood. But if he couldn’t engage in vampiric acts in the first place, however—

“I-it’s possible that the First Primogenitor did not anticipate this situation...”

Yukina lowered her voice, murmuring with concern.

“Coming from them, it is...”

Kojou covered his eyes and groaned. Even to the First Primogenitor, the world’s oldest vampire, seeing a human with vampiric factors alone must have been a first. Little wonder that he hadn’t anticipated Kojou losing his ability to drink blood.

If that hypothesis was on the mark, the situation Kojou and Yukina were in had become far graver. This was because they had no way of assembling the twelve Blood Servants required to bring The Blood’s Beast Vassals under control.

“What to do?” Kojou murmured under his breath.

His heart leaped with a heavy *thump*, as though mocking his anguished concerns.

Kojou’s vision constricted and reddened as an agonizing scream escaped his

throat. Vile, destructive impulses welled up within him, and his breathing grew ragged. He could feel vast demonic energy swirling within the deepest recesses of his body.

“Senpai...?!”

Realizing something was wrong with Kojou, Yukina stood up without even putting her disheveled uniform back in order.

“Himeragi...the spear...!”

Desperately hanging on to his thinning consciousness, Kojou shouted out to Yukina. Suddenly, she blinked hard, as though she couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell her.

“Huh?”

“Get it ready! Hurry!”

“Y-yes!”

Overwhelmed by Kojou’s intensity, Yukina drew her silver spear. The lance extended to its full length with a familiar metallic sound, and a pale glow enveloped its blades.

Kojou turned toward the main blade and slammed his right arm into it.

“Senpai! What in the world are you...?!”

Yukina let out a brief yelp. Her spear had passed through his right wrist, its bloody blade thrust near his elbow. Though she tried to pull it out an instant later, she stopped before she had the chance to finish. That was because Kojou’s arm, poking out of what remained of his parka, had morphed into a grotesque form.

“Your arm...!”

“So this is the power of that chick’s blood...!”

Kojou spat out his words as he glared with disgust at his repulsively transformed right limb.

There was no longer anything remotely human about it. Yet it also differed from the arm of any demon Kojou was familiar with. If he had to compare it to

something, it most closely resembled the limb of a dragon.

Glossy scales resembling metal armor now composed the resilient flesh of his arm, and his fingers had become talons as sharp as knives. Inside his newly enlarged limb pulsed raging, high-intensity demonic energy. It was so dense that it would have torn his body to shreds had he not gained the resilient constitution of a dragon.

“Zana’s blood will protect your flesh for a little while—”

That was what the First Primogenitor had told Kojou. He’d probably anticipated that Kojou would transform like this.

“Beast Vassal demonic energy is...altering your physiology...?!”

As she kept her grip on the silver spear, Yukina exclaimed this. The scales covering Kojou’s arm were pitch-black—the same color as The Blood’s Beast Vassals. The demonic energy they gave off was beginning to leak out against his will. Had the blood Zana bequeathed him not changed the composition of his flesh, Kojou’s body would have long burst apart, unable to withstand the surging demonic energy.

This wouldn’t last for long, though. If he couldn’t control the Beast Vassals, he would eventually hit his breaking point.

“Himeragi! Kill me with the Beast Vassals! If they go haywire, this island will get blown away!”

“Wh...what are you saying?! I cannot possibly do that, senpai! You only just regained your humanity after all this time...!”

Yukina promptly rejected his plea and the tragic resolve therein, but Kojou would not yield. As the host of the Beast Vassals, he knew better than anyone how close they were to rampaging.

“Please. There’s no more time... I can’t...hold them back anymore...!”

“Ghhh...”

Yukina’s hands trembled as she gripped her spear. She shook her head to banish her hesitance, then quietly regulated her breathing. All emotion vanished from her open eyes as the dazzling glow of spiritual essence

enveloped her small form.

“Himeragi!”

“I will stop the Beast Vassals! If I deploy a D.O.E. barrier with Snowdrift Wolf —”

“Stop! Are you trying to do the job of twelve spirit mediums all by yourself?!”

Kojou’s expression twisted in desperation. The unconstrained spiritual energy Yukina was releasing enveloped him like wings. She was trying to counteract the demonic energy gushing out from the Beast Vassals to stop them from running amok.

“It’s no good! Keep using that power, and you’ll vanish before I do...!”

Pulling his right arm back from the spear, Kojou tried to thrust Yukina away.

At that moment, Yukina was not the Blood Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. She couldn’t use Kojou’s demonic energy to offset and neutralize her spiritual energy. Consequently, Yukina’s spiritual energy, boosted by Snowdrift Wolf past all human limits, was purifying her own flesh, morphing her into a higher-dimensional being. In mysticism, this was known as taking flight to the Land of the Immortals—or to put it more crudely, angelification. It meant Yukina would vanish from the mortal realm.

Yukina knew this full well, yet she did not cease her release of spiritual energy.

“Senpai, what will happen to Miss Aurora if you die? Weren’t you going to bring her back...?”

Yukina gave a fleeting smile, her spear still trained on Kojou. As the number of wings she deployed increased, she continued to speak, seemingly for her own benefit as much as his.

“It will be all right. I am not a good enough girl to become an angel so easily.”

“Guh...”

“Quit it,” retorted Kojou powerlessly, but his voice never reached Yukina. The power of the Divine Oscillation Effect unleashed from Snowdrift Wolf increased, forcing the demonic energy in Kojou’s body to dissipate.

Perhaps this would halt the Beast Vassals' rampage. This thought lasted but a single moment.

The next instant, a cloud of demonic energy gushed out of Kojou's back to shrug off Yukina's spiritual energy. This turned into a misshapen black wing resembling a Grim Reaper's scythe that burned Yukina's asunder.

"Himeragi! Run!"

The wing of dense, materialized demonic energy ignored Kojou's will, howling as if it was a living creature with a mind of its own. It stretched beyond ten meters in height with room to spare before slicing through the air to assault Yukina. He could do nothing but watch.

"...!"

Yukina thrust up her silver spear to just barely hold the black wing at bay. Unable to withstand the recoil from her glowing, demonic energy—nullifying wings being so deeply rent, she went flying backward.

Though she managed to land on her feet just short of colliding with the breakwater, another wing soared as she tottered off-balance. No, this wasn't a wing. It was a giant summoned beast enveloped in pitch-black lightning—a Beast Vassal.

"Gwaaaaaaaaah...!"

Kojou screamed, unable to endure the backlash of demonic energy from trying to stop the Beast Vassal's movements. The impact felt like it would tear his whole body apart. It turned out he really was incapable of controlling his familiars in his current state.

"—Senpai!"

Distracted by his agony, Yukina reacted an instant too late. This was a fatal opening against a raging Beast Vassal. Snowdrift Wolf was powerless to intercept the sprinting creature as it morphed into a pitch-black flash of light. No human could react to evade an attack like this.

At this rate, Yukina's body would be torn asunder with ease. The instant she thought this, however, an invisible wall sprung up before her to halt her

assailant as it swung down its front paw.

Somehow, an invisible bulwark had fended off the Beast Vassal's enormously destructive blow. It was a rift torn into space itself, a pseudo-spatial severing created via ritual magic. Even a Beast Vassal, with all its power, could not rend space that had already been torn.

"...Let us call it Ricercare Type Six, shall we?"

As Yukina took a knee, she heard that mocking, sarcastic voice from behind.

Standing there was a girl with long, black, old-fashioned hair, wearing an equally old-fashioned sailor-style school uniform. She carried an odd spear with a forked tip in her hands.

"Huh...?"

Yukina raised a clueless voice as she gazed up at the girl in bewilderment. The fact that this person had saved her must have been difficult for her to digest.

Sending Yukina a scornful glance, the girl elegantly twirled her spear.

"Itogami Island's travel restrictions are finally lifted, and here you are having a lovely time without me. Could I have you explain the situation in detail?"

Kiriha Kisaki smiled boldly as she stared at the grotesque monster Kojou had become.

4

Though the black, bloody mist scattering from Kojou's body seemed like an incomplete mirage, it took the form of a beast as it gazed down upon the girls from on high.

He was in even worse shape than before. Further transformed into a monster, Kojou crawled over the ground, hunched over. Pitch-black scales were encroaching over his entire body, and several misshapen horns were protruding from the rear of his skull toward his back. One might wonder if there was anything of his own mind left.

Kiriha held her lead-colored forked spear at the ready as she glared at this

monstrous Kojou.

“Miss Kisaki, why are you on Itogami Island...?”

Yukina asked Kiriha this as she rose to her feet. By rights, the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island was outside the jurisdiction of Kiriha’s Bureau of Astrology. She should have had no reason to intervene in the Electoral War on Kojou and Yukina’s behalf.

Kiriha, however, gave Yukina a cold look in response, resentfully narrowing her eyes for some reason. She looked like a hunter whose prey had been poached right before her eyes.

“Do not underestimate the Bureau of Astrology’s intelligence network. You fought a dragon, didn’t you?”

“Ah...”

Yukina lapsed into an awkward silence as she deduced the reason for the girl’s ire. Kiriha Kisaki was a proud Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology, an expert in anti-demon beast combat. From her point of view, an encounter with a dragon, the mightiest of foes and the greatest of prey, was a godsend.

“You have quite some nerve, Yukina Himeragi, to leave a Priestess of the Six Blades behind as you lay hands upon a dragon.”

“Th-that was... He was cooperating with the Electoral War, so I had no choice...!”

Yukina defended herself in a frail voice. It was true that she’d crossed blades with a dragon, but she hadn’t wanted to fight him. The ancient Flame Dragon called Kreyd had lent his power to The Blood as a member of the Order of the End. *It would have been far easier to not have had to battle that monster,* thought Yukina.

Kiriha coolly shook her head.

“I have no interest in your excuses, thieving cat. Now, your man has no choice but to pay with his body to compensate for my stolen target.”

“H-he is not my ‘man’!”

Yukina nervously retorted with this as she repositioned her spear. Kiriha's tongue was as sharp as ever, but her combat ability was equal or superior to Yukina's own. She was quite grateful to have the woman at her side in this situation.

"So what has happened to Kojou Akatsuki? Last I heard, he relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor and fell to the rank of a mere civilian."

"Miss Zana—the First Primogenitor's Blood Servant—implanted Beast Vassals into him."

Yukina kept her explanation brief. The fact that the Bureau of Astrology had already discerned Kojou had lost the power of the Fourth Primogenitor proved that its intelligence gathering was quite something. Little wonder Kiriha was proud.

The girl grimaced blatantly the instant she heard Zana's name.

"Zana Lashka the Assoluta? Implanting Beast Vassals? But how...?"

"She...employed...oral confiscation to..."

Yukina's cheeks reddened as she beat around the bush. Kiriha gave Yukina's maidenly reaction a brief snort.

"I see. Through the mouth, in other words. So when she stole Kojou Akatsuki's lips before your very eyes, you were either in a bewildered state or turned on from watching."

"I—I was not aroused!"

Agitated, Yukina refuted Kiriha's unjustified insult.

"Well, setting your fetishes aside, I largely grasp the current situation."

"What do you mean, 'fetishes'...?!"

"So what do you intend on doing with him...?"

Kiriha asked this in a serious tone. It was as though the irreverent girl from before had been an entirely different person.

"I will stop the Beast Vassals."

Yukina spoke this without any hesitance. Kiriha raised an eyebrow with

exasperation.

“Isn’t that impossible? Wouldn’t it be far quicker to just stab him to death?”

“Th-that isn’t true!”

Yukina’s diction was flustered as she closed the distance with Kiriha.

“The First Primogenitor said the Beast Vassals can be controlled with enough Blood Servants. If worse comes to worse, I shall stop the Beast Vassals by myself.”

“...Blood Servants, you say...”

Murmuring to herself, Kiriha set her eyes upon the silvery chain wrapped around Yukina’s wrist. “Well, fine,” she said with a light shrug of her shoulders, laying a hand upon the scarf of her sailor suit. Before the other girl’s very eyes, Kiriha suddenly stripped off her outer garment. Just watching made Yukina flustered.

“M-Miss Kisaki?! Is now really the time for this?!”

“But isn’t stripping precisely what the moment calls for...? Using sex appeal to tame Kojou and make him drink my blood...isn’t that what you always do?”

Now dressed only in a thin tank top, Kiriha tilted her wrist slightly as she inquired back with a questioning look. Her slender, model-like physique was such that Yukina couldn’t help but consider her attractive despite being the same gender.

Demonstrating her pride in her attractive appearance, Kiriha sashayed toward Kojou. In spite of this, the grotesque monster he’d turned into merely howled menacingly at her.

“Huh?!”

The pitch-black wing protruding from Kojou’s back turned into a beast once more and assaulted Kiriha from the side. Her eyes widened as she intercepted it with a spatial severing.

“Wait a...?! What is the meaning of...?! Why is he attacking me?!”

For once, Kiriha’s emotions were bared as she lamented aloud. Apparently,

she was less worked up by the Beast Vassal attack than her inability to seduce Kojou. It must have come as a shock considering how easily his lust took control under normal circumstances.

I get how you feel, thought Yukina with just a smidgeon of sympathy. She had undergone an identical experience just a short while before.

“Currently, Akatsuki-senpai is still an incomplete vampire, so he doesn’t have any vampiric urg—”

“In other words, he’s a pretend vampire monster who can’t even drink blood.”

Perhaps still nursing a grudge, Kiriha disparaged Kojou as she took out a bundle of lead-colored spell tablets hidden under her skirt.

“What do you intend to do?”

“If I cannot make him behave by feeding him blood, I am left with no choice but to capture him by force, yes?”

Kiriha replied bluntly with this to Yukina’s inquiry.

“The problem is, how much can Kojou Akatsuki heal himself in this state? I would rather not inflict any grave injuries upon him... Er, what?”

Beside her, Yukina’s eyes were practically bulging out of her head. Realizing this, Kiriha narrowed her eye with a questioning look.

Yukina shook her head with a touch of haste.

“No, I apologize. I simply did not think you of all people would be concerned for senpai’s safety...”

“You and I really need to have a little talk sometime.”

Kiriha glared at Yukina with an audible clench of her teeth. It was at this moment that the pair’s opportunity for a tension-free conversation came to an end.

The demonic energy being unleashed from the monsterized Kojou changed in character, and bloody mist gushed out of him with increased force. This swirled in midair, warping into a completely bestial form. This was a mass of demonic

energy so dense as to possess sentience—a vampiric Beast Vassal.

“The Beast Vassals!”

“They’re manifesting...?!”

Yukina and Kiriha shouted this simultaneously. There were now two materialized vassals. One was a lion enveloped by pitch-black lightning. The other was a similarly pitch-black manticore.

“What are these black Beast Vassals...?!”

Kiriha shouted this while evading the sable lion that had transformed into lightning. This had to be her first time encountering them.

“They were The Blood’s! I heard they are prototypes whose power matches the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals!”

“I see... So this is the power the First Primogenitor gave to Kojou Akatsuki.”

Kiriha intercepted the ceaseless downpour of lightning attacks with her forked spear. She was using the pseudo-spatial severing ritual she’d stolen from Sayaka’s Lustrous Scale. The Bureau of Astrology had developed the *Ricerca* to copy any curse or divine armament ritual to fight demon beasts with a wide range of characteristics.

The downside of the weapon’s versatility was that it burned through ritual energy at a tremendous rate. If she continued deploying pseudo-spatial severing, Kiriha would wind up exhausted in the not too distant future.

“Miss Kisaki!”

Yukina tried to back Kiriha up, but black flames scattered by the manticore stopped her from getting close. Even with the demonic energy nullification of Snowdrift Wolf, suppressing the creature’s flame and poison was no easy task. Approaching Kojou while he was protected by the Beast Vassal was simply impossible.

Furthermore, those weren’t the only Beast Vassals that had been implanted in Kojou’s body.

“This isn’t good...!”

Kiriha's face twisted with unease. The monsterized Kojou released more demonic energy, summoning a new servant, a pitch-black shelled beast enveloped by mist.

The attack range of this Beast Vassal, which symbolized the vampiric ability to turn into mist, was frighteningly broad. It was the worst possible matchup for Kiriha and Yukina, who both specialized in close combat. But their awareness of this wasn't going to stop the summoning. The pitch-black shelled beast fully materialized during the time the pair was kept at bay, roared malevolently, and spewed vile mist that destroyed whatever it touched with incredible force.

Before that mist could press down on the pair, a roar echoed that sounded like a female shriek. The ritual energy–imbued cry generated a ferocious blast of wind that blew the huge creature away, along with its black mist. It was a large-scale ritual spell artillery attack that had used sound as its catalyst.

“The Lion King Agency...!”

Saved from peril, Kiriha looked back with a sour expression.

A tall girl stood on the coastal breakwater wielding a silvery recurve bow as her ponytail flapped in the breeze. Without a pause, she nocked a second arrow and repeated her ritual spell artillery strike, shoving the pitch-black shelled beast down into the sea.

“Miss Sayaka!”

“Yukina, you're all right?! I'm so glad... Wait, what are you doing with Yukina, Kiriha Kisaki?! And why are you showing your underwear?!”

Leaping down from the breakwater, Sayaka Kirasaka raced toward Yukina. She'd apparently come running after receiving Yukina's *shikigami* turned carrier pigeon.

Kiriha clicked her tongue, looking back with blatant annoyance as Sayaka came closer and began making a fuss.

“Hah?! Hold on. Even if it was just because Yukina was here, I did save you, Kiriha, so what's with the attitude?! It was only because she was here, though!”

“What a noisy monkey you are. I understand you're happy to have finally

learned human speech, but could you keep it down a little?”

“Wh-who’s the monkey, you Bureau of Astrology mutt?!”

Sayaka snapped over Kiriha’s blatantly abusive language, angrily shouting at her like a little girl. Yukina knew they’d genuinely tried to kill each other the first time they’d met, but the two got along even worse than she’d imagined.

Regardless, Yukina was happy that Sayaka had arrived on the scene sooner than she’d expected. To be honest, without her support, she couldn’t imagine a way they could have sliced through three Beast Vassals’ attacks and emerged unscathed.

“Just shut up and shoot them with the bow already. You are a creature with knowledge of tool use, are you not?”

“I was thinking of firing right now whether you said to or not... And hey, don’t talk about people like they’re wild animals!”

“—Goodness. It seems we have made it in time. You have my thanks, Witch of the Void.”

Yukina heard a calm voice from behind the ongoing, lowbrow war of words between Kiriha and Sayaka.

Appearing from a ripple-like sway in midair was a small doll-like woman wearing an extravagant dress and carrying a black cat in her arms.

“Master! And Ms. Minamiya...!”

Yukina’s expression brightened a bit as she addressed both. It seemed Natsuki, who’d vanished to repair her Guardian, had brought Sayaka and the black cat with her.

An instructor from the Lion King Agency and Itogami Island’s strongest Witch—under the circumstances, the two were probably the best reinforcements they could possibly hope for.

“I take my eyes off him for a few moments, and that idiot’s done something strange again...”

Natsuki spat out frigid words as she gazed at her pupil turned into a misshapen monster.

When she snapped her fingers without warning, the air around Kojou distorted. Crimson briars shot out from nowhere, binding him and his two Beast Vassals. The briars that Natsuki referred to as Gleipnir were sorcerous devices for capture from which even the Fourth Primogenitor's familiars could not escape. Bound to the ground, the pitch-black lion and manticore ferociously thrashed, but this only caused the thorns to tighten around them further.

"It is my fault for not stopping this. The First Primogenitor's Blood Servant forced a...kiss...onto Akatsuki-senpai, and The Blood's Beast Vassals—"

"So she shoved them down his throat..."

"Er...ahhh, yes. More or less."

Yukina thought her wording was somewhat objectionable, but no human present was willing to give Natsuki lip about it.

Kiriha and Sayaka worked as an unwitting team to keep the black-shelled beast in check. They divided their labor, Kiriha using pseudo-spatial severing to draw off the enemy's mist attacks and Sayaka providing rear support. They were a surprisingly efficient pair.

Even with both girls working at it, they could not inflict effective damage on a Beast Vassal. They needed a more decisive method of dealing with the situation.

"The Lost Warlord and his favorite concubine... It's not surprising that was too much for Yukina on her own. If anything, she has done rather well to hold out this long."

The black cat wore a look of rare gravity as she, or rather, Yukari Endou, commented.

Her statement was not a reflection of her favoritism as a mentor. By rights, having come face-to-face with the First Primogenitor and living to tell the tale was something to consider good fortune aplenty.

This said, it was hard to say if she could safely slice her way through the First Primogenitor's dangerous ordeal. Even with Kiriha and Sayaka's aid, she was about at her limit of how much she could keep Kojou contained while on the brink of rampage.

“Ms. Minamiya, can you temporarily isolate Akatsuki-senpai in the Prison Barrier?”

Yukina poured her faint hopes into the question she posed to Natsuki.

The Prison Barrier was an otherworldly prison built inside Natsuki’s dreams. Yukina had heard that she could freely control the passage of time within that world because of that.

If they trapped Kojou inside the Prison Barrier, time would be frozen for him. During the time his rampage was kept in check, they could assemble the necessary number of Blood Servants or come up with some other countermeasure. It was probably the surest way of breaking the current stalemate.

“No, it won’t work,” replied Natsuki, coolly shaking her head.

“I’m sure you are already aware that I cannot bring Beast Vassals into the Prison Barrier. Even if I dragged Kojou Akatsuki in, the creatures he’s summoned will remain behind in this world.”

“Aaa...”

Natsuki’s statement left Yukina at a loss for words.

Now that she mentioned it, the same thing had happened when Yukina and Kiriha fought Natsuki. Even the Prison Barrier could not completely seal the power of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals. If anything, it was likely the sealing of the host’s body would only make their rampage worse.

“On the other hand, it’s impossible for us to subdue the Beast Vassals by force. Maybe we could manage if it was one or two, but if more come out, Itogami Island won’t hold.”

Natsuki spoke as she glared at the three Beast Vassals that had already fully materialized. A total of twelve of The Blood’s servants had been implanted in Kojou. The more time that passed, the more likely new ones would awaken. Even Natsuki’s sorcerous device couldn’t bind them all.

“I will deal with the Beast Vassals somehow since I am Akatsuki-senpai’s only Blood Servant at present...!”

Yukina strongly gripped the shaft of her spear as she made the vow. In truth, the spiritual pathway between her and Kojou had been severed the moment he relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, but Yukina didn't think that was any excuse to forsake him. Yet the black cat, seemingly irritated by her resolve, spoke with a cruel tone of voice.

"Stop. It is no use."

"Master?!"

"Even if you completely Faux-Angelicized, that wouldn't be enough to destroy a dozen Beast Vassals equal in power to the Fourth Primogenitor's."

"...!!"

Her final trump card analyzed and rejected, Yukina was left speechless.

"If it was viable, I would eliminate the boy serving as their host, but it is best to refrain. This ruckus hasn't gotten any worse because he's been holding those things in check."

The black cat sighed wearily as she looked at Kojou within the cage of briars. Though his outward appearance was monstrous, he was still stopping the Beast Vassals from rampaging through the force of his will. The fact that only three of the twelve had materialized was proof of this.

Objectively, destroying Kojou would only make the situation more dangerous. Completely freeing the Beast Vassals from their host's shackles would only cause them to scatter demonic energy without rhyme or reason.

"What is the First Primogenitor's goal? If he merely wanted to make Kojou Akatsuki suffer, why bring back The Blood's Beast Vassals at all?"

Natsuki posed this question aloud with great calm. Binding two Beast Vassals had to be a strain even for her, but she showed no signs of fatigue.

"The First Primogenitor came to Akatsuki-senpai with a deal."

Yukina desperately kept her nervousness at bay as she replied with this. Natsuki raised an eyebrow, finding this somewhat surprising.

"A deal?"

“He said he would give Akatsuki-senpai the power to go to Nod and bring Miss Aurora back. In exchange, he would have to protect this world from the threat the city poses.”

“I see. And he got the The Blood’s Beast Vassals out of that?”

“Hmph,” went Natsuki, twisting her lips at an angle.

Yukina looked down at the silver chain wrapped around her wrist and nodded.

“The First Primogenitor said that The Blood’s Beast Vassals can be controlled if we assemble twelve Blood Servants at minimum—”

“Failing that, the rampaging creatures sink the island, so the gate to Nod disappears either way, I take it. Rather violent means, I must say.”

“—He’s always been so careless.”

The unfamiliar voice suddenly interrupting the conversation made Yukina and others gasp and poise their weapons.

The speaker was a woman with pale-green, gemstone-like hair flapping in the breeze as she stood at the water’s edge. She showed no fear despite standing right beside Kojou’s Beast Vassals.

“So he anticipated this, causing a disturbance in my domain? You owe me for this, Warlord.”

The girl narrowed her jade eyes and murmured this to herself. Her apparent age differed little from that of Yukina and the other girls. She possessed a lovely and powerful-looking face reminiscent of a wild leopard.

Yukina, obviously Sayaka and Kiriha, and even Natsuki and Yukari had failed to notice her presence, despite the fact that she was enveloped in such an enormous amount of demonic energy that it put Kojou’s Beast Vassals to shame.

“...You are...!”

Yukina uttered these words in a daze as she gazed at the jade-eyed girl.

Her presence was unexpected, yet when Yukina thought about it, the fact she

was here made sense. Yukina and the others were in Island South, the domain under her rule.

The girl looked back at the surprised Yukina and purred.

“It has been some time, wielder of the Schneewaltzer. Have you improved your skill a little since then?”

“The Chaos Bride, is it?”

Instead of Yukina, frozen in place and unable to raise a voice, Natsuki invoked the woman’s popular title. She was one of the true primogenitors along with Ki Juranbarada and Aswadguhl Aziz. Her true identity was that of the Chaos Bride—the Third Primogenitor, ruler of the Central American Dominion known as the Chaos Zone.

“I do not like being addressed by that stuffy name. Giada is fine, Natsuki Minamiya.”

The jade-eyed girl made a ferocious smile that showed off her sharp fangs. Slowly shifting her gaze, she scrutinized the silver chain Yukina possessed as if to test her.

“Twelve Blood Servants to serve as offerings—certainly that amount would be able to subdue the black Beast Vassals, but is that brat truly worthy of so many vassals?”

“...We will assemble them. Provided we have time, I am certain of this.”

Giada seemed like she could kill people with a glance, yet Yukina stared right back at her. Even when the glow in the Third Primogenitor’s eyes increased, she still did not look away.

The next moment, Giada broke into a soft smile, gazing with amusement at Yukina’s attitude.

“Very well. I will grant you all half a day.”

The next instant after the Third Primogenitor stated this, three lightning strikes poured onto the ground. The bolts shot right through Kojou’s three Beast Vassals, blowing their huge sable frames away.

These lightning strikes were attacks from Giada’s own Beast Vassal. The giant

thundercloud now enveloping all of Itogami Island's sky was one of her familiars.

Kojou's materialized Beast Vassals wavered, bathed in a ceaseless downpour of electricity.

A moment later, both the creatures and their host were swallowed up by darkness. Without a sound, Kojou and the others had been surrounded by a vast blackness over one hundred meters in diameter.

The mist, flames, and lightning from the familiars couldn't escape the void, either. They vanished noiselessly into the darkness as suddenly as they had appeared. The only thing left was a semispherical scar carved into the beach.

"Spatial control...no, the space itself is your Beast Vassal, Giada Kukulkin...!"

Natsuki observed this with a grave expression. She understood more than anyone just how frightening Giada's Beast Vassal was precisely because she employed a vast array of spatial control spells herself.

A world filled with infinite darkness—this was her Beast Vassal. By enveloping Kojou within it, she could seal him and his servants. It was a brute force measure only a vampire primogenitor could accomplish.

"Even I cannot keep him sealed without painstaking efforts."

Giada commented on this with a strained smile, her tone calm and devoid of pride.

"Midnight. Assemble your offerings to him by midnight tonight. I will keep Kojou Akatsuki at bay until then, along with the Beast Vassals that damnable Kenon left behind."

"—You have my thanks, Giada."

Yukina lowered her spear, touching a hand to her chest as she bowed.

They'd only put the rampage off by half a day. Until then, they had to look for a way to assemble twelve Blood Servants to bring the Beast Vassals under control. The possibility of achieving this was better than zero, for the beautiful primogenitor before them had granted them the precious time needed to do it.

"Make sure to entertain me with your next move. Do not betray my

expectations, Sword Shaman Girl.”

Giada smiled, her body melting away and vanishing.

Suddenly freed from the primogenitor’s oppressive aura, Yukina abruptly lost her strength. As she paled, the black cat shouted something up at Sayaka and raced over.

Using her spear to support her wobbling body, Yukina forced her consciousness to remain tethered. Nothing was over yet. It hadn’t even truly begun.

Gazing at the cavity in the beach from which Kojou had vanished, she thought desperately of what she could do to save him. The silvery chain around her left wrist emitted a cold glow.



CHAPTER THREE
GIRL TALK

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GIRL TALK

1

Before daybreak—

A powerful sea breeze blew through the steel-colored cityscape shrouded in darkness.

Senra was its name.

It was an artificial city floating on the Great Sea of Nod, a corridor that continued into the Eastern Lands, the realm of Else. It also served as a frontline fortress to protect against dragon invasions.

A spiral-shaped structure known as a Goplam towered at the center of the city with four artificial isles in its environs, one in each direction. The countless throng of islands floating in the surrounding seas were where captives forcibly relocated from Else were made to live.

Even this metropolis of over a million souls had gone silent, seemingly asleep under the morning sky.

A man quietly stood at the northern cape of that desolate city on a cliff facing the Great Sea of Nod.

“Cain!”

He slowly turned around, realizing someone had called his name.

Though the man had a shapely facial structure, he was average-looking on the whole and unlikely to stand out. He wore the robe of a technological officer, and he held a carnelian stone tablet in his hands. The pale tone of his skin and the golden glow of his eyes marked him as one of the Devas.

“Cain! Damn you, what are you still doing out here?”

When the person raced over, lightly out of breath, the man cocked his head with a mystified smile.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Don’t ‘oh’ me! How long do you plan on strolling around? Get back to the Goplam!”

Grasping the utterly unconcerned Cain’s cheeks with both hands, the person forced his gaze toward the sky above the sea to the east. Over there, like a dark reflection of the water’s surface, the sky had begun to turn white. It was almost daybreak.

However, even when this was pointed out to him, Cain obstinately shook his head.

“Wait. Please wait. This is a critical juncture. Glenda, are you finally ready?”

Cain called this out behind him. In an open, austere stretch of ground at the edge of the sea stood a young girl who looked six, maybe seven years old. She had long, steel-colored hair.

The girl was tracing a magic circle at her feet that was so large, you could plop an entire house into it. A cable stretching out from it connected to Cain’s tablet. The surface of the tablet was lined with numbers from a complex mathematical formula that changed from moment to moment.

“The hell is that? Some way to do magical calculations?”

The person grimaced and asked about the unfamiliar formula, but Cain ignored this as he continued operating the stone tablet. He was inputting such a vast quantity of numbers without hesitation that it boggled the mind.

“Wait. What’s with this stupid, huge volume of information?! What kind of grand spell are you trying to use?!”

“Observe and all will be clear. Glenda, it’s dangerous so move back a little?”

“Dah!!”

The girl with steel-colored hair ran over to Cain. She’d left some kind of doll in

the center of the magic circle in which she'd stood until that moment—a badly made figure that looked like a small wild animal.

“Let's go.”

Cain inputted the final command into the tablet. The carnelian stone device emitted a dazzling light as he unleashed his own vast divine energy in concert. The air shuddered with its strength; just watching it stung one's skin.

The divine energy flowing through the tablet activated the magic circle on the ground. A crimson ball of light emerged from the circle's interior, enveloping the doll placed at its center.

The change that occurred at that point was dramatic. The figure, which was made from nothing more than simple fabric, morphed into the form of a living creature, sitting up of its own will in defiance of the power of gravity. There was a glint of intelligence in its eyes fashioned from resin, and its lips opened wide to form a smile. It showed off its jagged, sharklike teeth as it made a sarcastic “keh-keh” laugh. What was once a doll devoid of life was now clearly demonstrating emotion.

“Did it work...?”

Cain drew in his breath and gazed at the figure transformed into a living creature. Glenda was so worked up that she'd changed into a little dragon, happily swaying her tail.

However, this miraculous event did not continue for long. Unable to withstand the burden of the magical calculations, the stone tablet shattered. Simultaneously, the glow of the magic circle vanished.

See ya later, the doll's mocking laugh seemed to say as its movements came to a halt. Its entire body whitened and hardened like stone, crumbling apart moments later.

“No good, huh...? And I thought it would go well...”

Lowering his shoulders like a child being scolded, Cain fell to his knees on the spot. Glenda curled up in disappointment.

“Cain, you bastard...! You were trying to give that doll life, weren't you...?!”

When Cain hung his head, the person grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back up. Cain blinked in wonderment as if he didn't understand why they were angry with him.

"Do you even understand what you've done...?!"

"Y-yeah. Of course I know..."

"It's not just an issue of giving an object life! You rewrote the laws of the world!"

"To be more accurate, I tried to rewrite them, but I failed."

Cain calmly shook his head even as he was being jerked back and forth.

Changing the composition of matter, granting artificial sentience to an object—that was fine. That much was in line with what ordinary alchemy could accomplish.

However, Cain's experiment was nothing as superficial as the alteration of matter. He wasn't trying to change the doll. Inside that ball of light, he'd constructed a *world* where a sentient doll could exist.

He was rewriting the very physical laws of reality—his was a forbidden ritual even the Devas were not permitted to touch, technology so dangerous that misusing it would threaten the destruction of the world itself.

"Hmm. My magic computational abilities simply aren't up to snuff. I need to find a partner who can help me resolve the issue."

"This ain't the time for laid-back talk like that! What do you think you're doing, trying to complete something this forbidden?!"

The person's face came close, their bloodlust evident. Unexpectedly, Cain did not avert his eyes. He spoke with his usual evasive tone, yet his answer was completely serious.

"Isn't that obvious? To make this work and save the world."

"...You? Save the world with that forbidden spell? That's some pretty big talk."

The person's incredulous voice brimmed with anger.

Changing the lifeless into a living thing meant the opposite was equally possible. Furthermore, unlike alchemy, Cain's forbidden spell did not require fuel in the form of materials to be transmuted. If he could secure a sufficient power source, he'd be able to rewrite the world however he wished.

Forget saving the world. For all intents and purposes, this was a spell for destroying it.

Cain did not falter under the scolding, however. If anything, he was puffing out his chest in pride.

"I'd prefer if you called it the Holy Flash and not a forbidden spell."

"Holy Flash?"

"The name of this ritual. Cool, isn't it?"

"...Oh, please."

The person shook their head, deeply dispirited at Cain for not displaying even a sliver of guilt.

"So, um, you fine with this? That doll just now, that's the one Aswad really likes, I think?"

"Yes. So it is. That was why I thought I'd breathe life into it. I thought this would make him happy—"

"Even though it's a pile of salt now?"

The moment this was pointed out to him, Cain gasped and turned his eyes to the center of the circle. The figure that was there a moment earlier had been unable to retain its shape and was now a pile of translucent sand.

The wind picked up the pile of sediment and grazed Glenda, who went "geh" and stuck out her tongue. These were grains of salt. Cain's forbidden spell had turned the doll to salt.

"...This is bad."

"It's the natural consequence of your foolish endeavor. Have fun with that kid's righteous wrath."

The person dismissively spoke those words, feeling like they'd gotten

something off their chest.

Cain, however, was gazing not at the salt pile that had once been a doll but off to the horizon over the water in the distance.

“No, I don’t mean that. It’s daybreak.”

Cain murmured this in a tone of rare seriousness. The person turned to him and reflexively hurled an insult.

“You piece of trash! I told you to get your ass back to the fortress! Hurry!”

“Unfortunately, I seem to have used up all my power with the earlier Holy Flash.”

Cain wobbled and wilted then and there. His divine energy was completely exhausted, and now it seemed he could no longer stand.

During that time, the brightness in the eastern sky increased, and white light trickled in from the horizon. The Deva’s skin burned with the glow of the cellular destruction that heralded his demise.

“Hot, hot, burning, scorching—I’m turning to ash...!”

“...J-just how much of an idiot are you?!”

Dragging Cain along as he pathetically cried out, the person desperately ran in the direction of a building. Glenda was there to help, too, but the rising of the morning sun proved swifter. At this rate, they’d all go down together.

“Dammit all. Shit, hold on tight! We’re jumping to the Goplam!”

“Sorry, *Giada*. You’re a lifesaver.”

A trusting smile came over Cain as he looked up at the sorcerous device she instantly whipped out.

“Hmph.”

Snorting with pronounced irritation, she activated the teleportation device.

...Where the hell is this...?

That thought arose dimly from the edges of Kojou Akatsuki’s consciousness. He was surrounded by darkness, utter blackness in which not a single source of

light existed. There was no scent, sound, or even gravity. Even the contours of his body were vague and seemed to be melting into the darkness.

Amid this, only the fragmentary memory of the past that had emerged from the back of his mind was raw and vivid. It was far too fresh to dismiss it as a dream, yet Kojou had never experienced it. This memory belonged to the woman named Giada.

“Giada... Was I...seeing a memory from the Third Primogenitor?”

Just after he realized that possibility, something shifted within that thick blackness. He couldn't pick it up with his five senses, but Kojou felt someone's presence right beside him—a girl with jade eyes and beryl-colored hair.

“It is impressive that you are conscious while captive in Coatlicue's womb.”

The familiar voice directly touched Kojou's soul, causing it to tremble.

“Giada...Giada Kukulkin...”

“On top of that, you went so far as to intrude upon my memories, didn't you, Kojou Akatsuki?”

Despite having someone peek into her own past, Giada's words contained no anger. If anything, she was conveying that his astounding resiliency was worthy of her praise.

Coatlicue was probably one of the Beast Vassals serving Giada. She had used this Beast Vassal once before to imprison Dimitrie Vattler in another dimension. And now, she had aided Yukina and company by locking the rampaging Kojou away in other-dimensional space.

Unlike the Prison Barrier of Natsuki Minamiya, this area wasn't anything as ephemeral as the inside of a witch's dream. Rather, the Beast Vassal had used its ability to physically create a subdimension. That was why she had been able to capture Kojou and The Blood's Beast Vassals in one fell swoop. This did, however, place a great burden on her. He didn't think Giada could keep this up forever, even with the inexhaustible demonic energy she boasted. Inevitably, the Third Primogenitor would reach her limits, and when that moment arrived, she would be forced to let Kojou loose.

This, however, was not the reason why he was confused at the moment.

“Giada, why were you with Cain? Don’t tell me those are memories of Nod?”

Kojou pressed the issue with her. He didn’t really feel like his voice had come out, but his inquiry seemed to reach the woman nonetheless. Oddly, he got her unamused response loud and clear.

“...Is that truly what you wish to ask of me, Kojou Akatsuki?”

“What?”

“Surely you already know the answer. To inherit the curse of the Fourth Primogenitor is also to inherit that person’s blood memories.”

“...!!”

Kojou felt Giada’s words hit him like a punch out of nowhere.

He remembered his momentary glimpse at the landscape of Nod from once before. At the time, Kojou felt like someone’s vestigial thoughts were trying to tell him something, but had they been his own—?

“Fine, then. One can fairly argue you have a right to know the truth.”

Giada frostily conveyed this to Kojou while observing his bewilderment with pronounced amusement.

“Dig deeper into those abominable memories. Do so and curse your fate for having inherited the name of the hollow monster known as the Fourth Primogenitor—”

2

Blue light poured down from the glass ceiling as though you were looking up at the water’s surface.

The cafeteria was crowded with students during their lunch break. Aurora was just putting her lunch plate down on an open table near the window that had taken some effort to find.

“Ava, is this chair open? Let’s eat together.”

She suddenly heard a friendly voice beside her. The schoolgirl carrying a white canvas tote bag grinned, waving a hand as she looked down at Avrora. It was a girl with long, steel-colored hair—Glenda.

“Y-yeah.”

“You’re having the pasta lunch, Ava? Hmm, eggplant and red pepper penne, huh. Smells great—”

Glenda was already sitting in the opposite chair by the time Avrora gave that strained reply. She was a little perplexed by the nickname the girl had arbitrarily picked for her at some point, but strangely, she didn’t mind.

“A-actually I’m not good with spicy things, but I don’t like meat very much.”

Avrora’s cheeks reddened while she gave that subdued reply.

She could not stomach any meat dishes whatsoever. The smell of blood-infused meat was a no-go for her. The other thing on the lunch menu was a hamburger plate, so the pasta had been her only choice.

“Heh, I didn’t see that one coming.”

Glenda raised her eyebrows, her interest visibly piqued. Exposed to her innocent gaze, Avrora seemed constrained as she shook her head.

“G...Glenda, what are you having for lunch?”

“I’m having this. I bought this before I came to school!”

“Heh-heh-heh,” went Glenda as she took a paper bag out of her tote. It was stuffed to the brim with five large doughnuts. There was one strawberry, one cream, one chocolate, and one butternut chocolate. There was even one of the French crullers made with choux that Avrora loved so much.

“No fair... Is eating doughnuts at lunch even a thing?!”

“Of course it is. I’ve decided to make it one.”

When Avrora turned a jealous gaze toward her, Glenda smiled proudly and took out a plastic bottle of café au lait and a snack bag containing the latest brand of potato chips.

“Even chips...!”

“I’d get bored if it was all sweet stuff.”

The girl spoke with complete composure as she picked up the strawberry doughnut. When this left Ava utterly shocked, Glenda gently glanced back at her.

“Ava, you’re a good girl, but you’re a little stiff. You should be living free.”

“...Free?”

The unanticipated comment left Avrora bewildered. She knew what the word *free* meant. It meant to act of your own volition. It meant taking responsibility for your decisions.

But the word had a hollow ring to it. Someone had built her to be used, and she was there because she was caught up in someone else’s scheme. Avrora knew this.

“Here, have one.”

She dangled a doughnut before Avrora’s eyes. It was the French cruller with sugar sprinkled on top.

“You mustn’t forget what you really want deep down. That’s the key to remembering who you really are.”

“Glenda...?”

When Avrora gingerly took the doughnut, she suddenly remembered a particular boy.

If there was something she could call freedom in her past, it was the time she’d spent together with him, a fleeting moment that did not amount to even half a year.

She could no longer even remember his name. But her being alive was proof that it had happened. Avrora knew this.

“Hey, Ava...does the world look weird to you right now?”

Glenda took a sip of her café au lait as she inquired, as though testing the other girl.

“I can’t tell.”

Avrora gently shook her head as she shifted her gaze to the scenery beyond the window.

It was a world of blue that continued for who knew how far. Overhead was the vast surface of the sea, and below her eyes, the sky. As she currently was, Avrora could not tell whether this was how the world was supposed to be.

“Ah.”

Glenda sighed gently, not reproaching Avrora in any way.

Abruptly, a smile came over the mature-looking girl’s face. It was the smile of a little girl. Glenda brought her lips close to Avrora’s ear, whispering with a giggle in her voice.

“Hey, did you know? They say there’s a room in this school where the secrets of the world are locked inside.”

“Secrets of...the world?”

Avrora stared at Glenda with widened eyes.

“Yeah. Maybe you can reach it.”

Glenda nodded with a mysterious expression. Avrora couldn’t read her.

“Secrets of the world,” Avrora murmured quietly to herself. “Will something... change if I find these secrets?”

“You’ll get the precious things you’ve forgotten back. I’m sure Kojou will be happy, too.”

“...Kojou?”

Her body reacted faster than her head could comprehend. Her heart leaped as if she’d been struck by a jolt of electricity. Memories flooded into her mind. She remembered the particular boy she’d met on the artificial isle of never-ending summer.

Avrora couldn’t believe that she’d forgotten his name.

Now that her memory had been jogged, like it or not, she knew she did not belong in that world.

Wearing the same uniform and leading a boring but pleasant school life—

these were not the things she truly wanted.

For it was a world without Kojou Akatsuki.

“Good luck searching, Aurora.”

The girl with steel-colored hair munched a potato chip with a dry *snap*.

For some reason, the girl who felt so mature now looked so very young.

3

The lobby on the first stratum of Keystone Gate was in a pathetically ravaged state. On top of the Order of the End trampling through it, it had borne the brunt of the rioting demons’ assault.

Store after store carrying high-end brands had been cruelly and thoroughly destroyed, with even barely a light fixture surviving.

To the residents of the Demon Sanctuary, however, this level of trouble was an everyday occurrence.

Even surrounded by rubble, the portion of the facilities remaining intact had reopened for business as if nothing had happened. One of the establishments running strong was a hamburger shop from a major franchise.

“Asagi! Hey, Asagi! How long are you gonna pout like this?!”

Asagi was occupying a box seat right by the window. Yaze was calling out to her from his seat just across the aisle.

When Asagi stormed out of Saikai Academy, she’d marched straight to Keystone Gate. She’d been sitting in that shop ever since.

A seventh combo tray had just joined the other six piled on top of the table.

This wasn’t really binge eating from stress. This was a normal amount of food as far as she was concerned.

She often claimed she got hungry when she used her head. Yaze figured that might well be true where Asagi was concerned because her programming ability was simply that far beyond the norm. The fact that he always ended up splitting

the bill evenly, thus helping pay for her dinner expenses, was something he was somewhat less accepting of.

“I’m getting complaints about you, y’know! The Five Elements’ computational resources are tight ’cause some process of unknown origin is sucking ’em up. Apparently, it’s even worse than when the Order of the End was occupying the place.”

A pained expression came over Yaze as he pointed to a protesting e-mail on his smartphone.

While she was technically a “part-time student worker,” Asagi actually held root access rights to Itogami Island’s main computer cluster. This was because making maximum use of her abilities was directly linked to the entire island’s prosperity. Asagi had built all its firewalls to begin with, so the fact that she could access it whether she held the rights or not loomed large in that thinking.

This also meant that if Asagi monopolized the main computer’s computational resources for herself, Itogami Island’s operations would inevitably grind to a halt. You wouldn’t think even she would use it in that selfish a manner.

“It’s not me who’s doing it. If you wanna complain, tell it to Cain.”

Asagi languidly sipped on her iced coffee.

Yaze dropped his jaw, visibly dumbfounded.

“Cain...? What the heck does a guy who died before recorded history have to do with Itogami Island’s main computer?”

“Even if he’s dead, he left legacies and relics behind. One of them is right above our heads.”

Asagi jutted her right index finger straight up.

Yaze gasped and leaned forward with a sober look.

“...Nod?! You’re saying...Nod is interfering with Itogami Island’s information network?”

“They hid a function to open the gate in Keystone Gate’s physical structure, right? Do you really think it’s strange there’d be something that can mess with our end from up there?”

“So that’s it...!”

Yaze nervously pulled up his smartphone, swiftly typing and sending off a message. He was probably relaying Asagi’s “something” to Kazuma Yaze, his older brother.

“So you realized someone in Nod was interfering with Itogami Island?”

“Well, yeah.”

When Yaze inquired with a sharp look, Asagi bluntly gave him a shrug of her shoulders. He irritably sighed under his breath.

“The hell is his goal?”

“...There’s no actual damage, so it’s fine to just ignore it. For now anyway.”

“Nah, there has been damage.”

Yaze sullenly commented with this as he crossed his legs. Nod interference stealing Itogami Island computational resources was absolutely harm in his eyes.

“So what gives? If you know we’re being hit by a cyber attack from Nod, the heck are you doin’ in this place?”

“I’m just here for a meetup. It’s more convenient for Tanker this way.”

Asagi replied to Yaze’s reproachful question without the slightest change in her expression.

“Tanker?”

He felt like the sudden invocation of the elementary school hacker’s moniker was an ill omen.

Lydianne Didier, one of the Elite Children of Didier Heavy Industries, a firm involved in managing the Demon Sanctuary, held a recklessly granted special license to drive an anti-demon Micro Robot Tank within city limits.

As if to prove Yaze’s premonition true, a roar echoed throughout the lobby of Keystone Gate. The engine’s roar sounded like that of a fighter jet; clearly the operator wasn’t worried about being a nuisance.

“Lady Empress! I am most sorry for my tardiness!”

The crimson robot tank barged into the lobby, making panes of glass in the area audibly shake. Yaze burst out of the hamburger shop, and his jaw dropped.

“The hell is this?!”

“Oh, Sir President! I see that thou art interested in the Momiji! But of course, but of course.”

A girl’s voice with a historical stage play tone came out of the tank’s exterior speakers. It boosted her voice to a level of obnoxiousness that rivaled the sounds of the engine.

Yaze scowled as he used his ability to protect his particularly sensitive hearing.

“M-Momiji?”

“’Tis the ultimate in personal weaponry developed by Lady Empress and my humble self. Itogami Island’s flight restrictions having been lifted, the first prototype hath arrived fresh from the mainland.”

“That doesn’t mean you can bring a robot tank into the lobby of Keystone Gate! The Island Guard’s already on edge after the riot this morning...!”

Yaze gave a sigh of deep despair. The Island Guard was in lockdown mode. There was no way it would have let a robot tank as suspicious as this through a checkpoint.

He had no doubt at all this Momiji had dropped in through the rift in Keystone Gate’s ceiling. The proof was in the Vertical Launching System and Landing-Ready Jet Engine Flight Unit on the robot tank’s back. This was the origin of the roaring.

“Seems your operational test went well?”

After coming out of the hamburger shop, Asagi asked Lydianne this with a laid-back expression.

When the jet engines at last finished cooling down and came to a stop, the lobby regained some semblance of tranquility. The top hatch of the tank opened, from which a young girl with red hair poked out her head.

The tank must have been designed for a crew of two to begin with. This

Momiji was a couple of shirt sizes larger compared to the robot tanks Yaze had seen to date. Perhaps the extra room in the cockpit was why Lydianne had opted to wear a high-quality sailor suit—the uniform of the renowned girls' school she attended—over her typical skintight pilot outfit.

“Control software shortcomings aside, the hardware receiveth a passing grade. There shall be no hindrance sending it into combat with all— Ah, Lady Yume, what is amiss?!”

After Lydianne expressed her satisfaction with the tank she was examining, her expression suddenly grew clouded. Just then, she realized that the girl in the rear seat of the tank right behind her was slumped over with a listless look on her face.

“I’m...all right. I just feel a little sick...”

As she spoke those words, Yume Eguchi crawled out wearing the same school uniform as Lydianne. An adorable girl with a mature complexion, she evoked the image of a temperamental kitten.

At the moment, however, she was pale in the face from her ride in the unfamiliar tank. It seemed like she was holding down vomit as she shakily climbed down from the chassis.

“So even li’l Yume was on board... Wait, whaddaya mean sending it into combat?”

Yaze inquired about this with a casual demeanor. Yume pouted in dismay at his use of the nickname.

Lydianne turned back to Yaze, surprised that he would ask that.

“I hath heard its mission is to proceed to the land of Nod and rescue the vampire princess.”

“Huh?!”

Yaze glared at the side of Asagi’s face in abject shock.

“Hold on a sec—don’t tell me you plan on going to Nod and bringing li’l Avrora back all by yourself?! This isn’t just sour grapes over Kojou dumping you, is it, Asagi?”

“Since when did he dump me? I was just finding out for sure if he loves Avrora, got it?”

Asagi glanced at Yaze with a skeptical expression.

“Ahhh—er, now that you mention it that’s kinda how it was, but...”

Yaze muttered vaguely as he recalled the exchange between Kojou and Asagi that morning.

Kojou most certainly hadn’t professed his love for Avrora. Nor had Asagi even confessed to Kojou yet; saying she’d been dumped was quite the exaggeration.

“From the looks of him, I think his reaction would be pretty much the same if it hadn’t been Avrora who’d been taken, whether it’d be Nagisa or Himeragi—or even me.”

“...I guess you have a point. I think so, too.”

Maybe it took being his friend and years of close observation to tell, but Kojou Akatsuki hated few things more than the people close to him being put in harm’s way. The way he went from laid-back as usual to dynamic when he was protecting someone was proof of that.

Yaze didn’t know if Kojou acted that way out of guilt over failing to protect his little sister, who’d been hurt so gravely at such a young age, or whether that was just who he was at his core. Either way, Yaze had seen that inclination only grow stronger since he’d gained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

That was why Kojou was most likely motivated to bring Avrora back from her fall into Nod by something other than romantic feelings. Apparently, Asagi had picked up on that as a matter of course.

“So why were you angry this morning, then...?”

Yaze cocked his head to the side as he posed the question.

Asagi widened her eyes and flushed as if getting angry all over again.

“Huh? Well, anyone would be angry, right? That idiot said I had nothing to do with it, didn’t he?! That’s just not right!! Aren’t times like those when you’re supposed to say, *I know you of all people will lend me your strength*, or like, *I can’t do this without you*, or whatever?!”

“Ahhh...”

Asagi had gone on such a tangent that Yaze was stricken by a severe bout of exhaustion. He’d vaguely picked up on this before, but his childhood friend’s grasp of romance was just as awful as Kojou’s.

“Er, so... Basically, Kojou trying to rescue Avrora all by himself annoys you because he’s not treating you like you’re special?”

“It’s not being treated as special; I *am* special! Why does he have to lump me in with those Lion King Agency chicks who are always popping up? I’m Avrora’s friend, too!”

“R-right...”

Yaze was a little taken aback by Asagi’s tremendous force.

Since both their memories had been consumed in the Blazing Banquet, Yaze and Asagi didn’t remember it with any more clarity than Kojou, but they’d both hung out with Avrora, too. Now that she was finally revived, Asagi was just as concerned about and eager to rescue her as Kojou.

In that sense, Asagi really was unique. She’d just proudly proclaimed as much. Yet Kojou of all people had completely forgotten about it. That was what had sent her into a fury.

“But, well, did you ever just, like, ask Kojou why he had to go rescue li’l Avrora?”

“Thing is, I had to check if he had an ulterior motive. Just thinking of him rescuing Avrora all cool so he could speak sweet nothings to her would piss any girl off.”



“I—I guess it would.”

That certainly would annoy a girl. He could kind of understand how that had made Asagi feel this way.

“I get that, but how’d that turn into you going to Nod all by yourself?”

“Well, that idiot won’t appreciate me if I do anything less!”

Asagi began leaping with her logic once more. Yaze wondered if Kojou would find this off-putting instead of appreciating it.

“If I go and bring back Avrora in a jiff, that means Kojou won’t have to put himself in danger, won’t it?”

Lowering her eyes, Asagi finally revealed her real feelings.

Yaze exhaled with just a sliver of genuine admiration.

Asagi Aiba was a very proud girl. It really didn’t matter to her how Kojou felt about Avrora. She genuinely thought everything would be fine if she just brought Avrora back and settled things between them out in the open. If anything, Asagi must have thought leaving Kojou heartbroken over Avrora being gone was worse.

But still, thought Yaze while he skeptically scratched his head.

“Doesn’t that mean you’re just puttin’ yourself at risk instead?”

“...I wonder about that.”

For some reason, an impetuous expression came to Asagi’s face as she glanced at the sky through the crevice in the ceiling. She wasn’t merely bluffing out of stubbornness. Apparently, the girl also known as the Priestess of Cain had information about Nod that Yaze and his people did not.

“Thou need not worry, Sir President. I shall accompany her to the ends of existence. Momiji was a multi-seat craft to begin with.”

When an even more conflicted expression hovered on Yaze’s face, Lydianne turned her powerful smile on him. In spite of this, being consoled by a primary schooler only worried him further.

Yume, who had recovered from her car sickness, bowed beside Lydianne.

“So it is. I will be accompanying Asagi as well.”

“Huh?! You’re going to come, too?!”

Asagi raised a shrill voice of surprise. “She didn’t tell you, either?” went Yaze, flabbergasted as he glanced between Asagi and Yume.

“But of course. I need to show my fiancé Kojou that I am a capable woman.”

Yume spoke those words in a tone no less bold than the one Asagi had used just earlier. Ever since the Leviathan attack incident at Blue Elysium, Yume was adamant that Kojou had proposed to her.

Furthermore, from the way Yukina had reacted at the time, it wasn’t wholly a misunderstanding on Yume’s part, either.

“Wait. What do you mean ‘fiancé’?! That wasn’t just something you made up?”

Naturally, Asagi couldn’t let that slide and pressed the issue. Nevertheless, Yume remained completely composed for some reason.

“Did you not know, Miss Asagi? An oral contract is a contract nonetheless.”

“Er, I know that, but...! Awww, sheesh, what the hell’s going on here, Tanker?!”

“Things became as you see when I elucidated the situation to Lady Yume on the eve of our departure from school. Lady Yume is the ruler of my domain, so I cannot defy her.”

Lydianne made a light, frustrated moan. Yume was the reincarnation of Lilith, Witch of the Night and the World’s Mightiest Succubus. She currently served as the ruler of Tensou Academy Domain, which boasted the strongest forces on Itogami Island. Since Lydianne was one of Yume’s subjects, she viewed her as a liege to be served. A duty-minded girl like her would never refuse Yume’s command.

That was why Lydianne hadn’t been able to say no when Yume had insisted on going to Nod with them.

“Um, but isn’t this tank a two-seater?”

Asagi stubbornly objected with this, but Yume broke into a powerful grin.

“It is all right. I can fly, after all.”

“Grrr...”

Unaccustomed to losing in wars of words, Asagi pursed her lips in frustration.

Since the gate to Nod was in the sky, you needed an aircraft such as a transport helicopter to reach it. Lydianne had undoubtedly attached the optional flight unit to the tank with this in mind.

On the other hand, Yume could take to the skies with her wings. She also had the option of employing her succubus mind control ability to ride a flying demon. Yume could go to Nod on her own no matter how much Asagi might object.

“...Man, this is really messed up.”

Yaze muttered this with an irritated tone even as he started calculating things in his head.

Now that Kojou had relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, Yume was one of the most powerful demons on the island since she could control the divine beast Leviathan. Considering that Asagi would be wielding The Cleansing aboard Lydianne’s tank, those two could also exhibit overpowered combat performance.

When you got down to it, these girls were probably the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s only cards in their deck with a real shot at fighting the MAR forces under Shahryar Ren’s command. They could send the three girls into Nod with all the Island Guard’s units on escort duty. He couldn’t dismiss that plan as unrealistic.

He wondered, however, about the girls’ chances of coming back alive—

Perhaps his preoccupation with these cruel thoughts was why he didn’t notice someone approaching him from behind until the very last moment.

“—Mr. President.”

That flat, cold voice made Yaze let out a goofy-sounding “Whoa!” as he whirled around.

Standing in the dimly lit passage through the lobby was a woman in a secretary suit. Her evenly cut blue hair reaching just past her shoulders marked her as a homunculus.

“What is it, Miss Anato? Urgent business again?”

A wary look came over Yaze as he posed that question to the homunculus secretary from the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

Though he was the president of the Yaze consortium on paper, the man really at the helm was his older brother Kazuma. At the very least, Kazuma’s secretary chasing Yaze to a place like this meant there was an urgent matter to take care of. He felt trouble brewing.

The blue-haired secretary nodded. Her expression was neutral to the end.

“Affirmative. However, the first order of business concerns Miss Aiba, not you, Mr. President.”

“Me?”

Asagi grimaced, visibly perplexed. She’d never expected the woman to mention her name.

The next moment, a small-statured girl emerged from behind the secretary’s back.

“So this is where you were, Asagi Aiba.”

“Huh? Natsuki?”

The sight of her young, beautiful, doll-like teacher left Asagi bewildered. She’d never dreamed that Natsuki, whose whereabouts had been unknown, would be there looking for her.

“We need to talk. Sorry, but you’ll have to come with me.”

Natsuki, however, spoke with her usual haughty tone of voice as she refused to explain a thing about what was going on.

Somewhat annoyed, Asagi glared at the homeroom-teaching Witch.

“Right now? Why?”

“Kojou Akatsuki’s Beast Vassals have run amok.”

“...Huh?”

Asagi went silent for a moment. Even she'd never expected that reply.

“Wh-what do you mean, Kojou's Beast Vassals ran amok? Didn't he relinquish the power of the Fourth Primogenitor?”

“I'll fill you in later. There's no time to explain.”

When Asagi closed the distance, Natsuki coldly rebuffed her pupil.

Natsuki then trained her emotionless eyes toward Yume and Lydianne, who had both gone still. That instant, the two primary schoolers jumped a little and huddled shoulder to shoulder, stiffening in fear. Apparently, Natsuki had put them both through the wringer before. The girls wore expressions of undiluted terror as they stared at the Witch, who was even smaller than they were.

“The enhanced human from Didier Heavy Industries and the succubus girl, right? Good. You're coming, too.”

“Nnh...?”

“Um, umm...”

Natsuki activated a teleportation spell without bothering to wait for the two to reply. A ripple spread through the air, and the two schoolgirls and their tank vanished without a trace.

“Hey, Natsuki!”

Yaze's voice went ragged when he saw her make that executive decision. Before his statement could even reach her, however, Natsuki activated another spell and disappeared from sight. Somewhere along the way, Asagi had also teleported out.

Yaze was the only one left behind.

“...Whaddaya mean, Kojou's Beast Vassals went bonkers? The hell's goin' on?”

He clutched his head in earnest over the completely incomprehensible situation.

For some reason, Kojou had Beast Vassals who were going berserk even though he'd relinquished his vampire powers. Natsuki had whisked Asagi and

the primary school duo away because she knew why. He didn't get how any of this had happened.

“—Mr. President.”

“Waah?! Miss Anato, you're still here?”

Face still twitching, Yaze glanced back at the blue-haired homunculus whose presence he hadn't sensed at all.

The secretary's expression remained unchanged as she presented a bundle of paperwork resting on a clipboard.

“Director Kazuma Yaze requests that you sign these papers.”

“R-right... What, is that all?”

Yaze picked up the attached pen and examined the paperwork. His eyes went bloodshot as he drew in his breath.

The documents were nothing special in themselves. This sort of request was an everyday formality of business. The individual who'd made the request, however, *was* special, hence why the papers had gotten bumped up to Yaze.

“—Permission to enter Keystone Gate airspace? Wait, hold on a sec. What the hell is that woman thinking...?!”

Beside himself, Yaze muttered as he stared at the elegant stamp signing the request form.

The sheet had a letterhead drawn on it portraying a Valkyrie wielding a great sword.

It was the emblem of a certain royal family.

4

The Murakumo Coffee Shop was one of the eight café franchises operating in Itogami City. It offered high-end coffee for middling prices and boasted wide popularity; men and women alike rated it highly for its many good-looking employees.

On that one day, though, it wasn't the staffers attracting the customers' eyes.

"Hey, look at that."

A university student with a stereotypical womanizer's deep tan and blond hair tapped the shoulder of the friend next to him, pointing to the counter at the back of the store.

Two high schoolers were waiting for drinks at the counter.

One was a small dark-haired girl wearing a Saikai Academy uniform. The powerful glint in her large eyes left a deep impression and gave her an otherworldly vibe. At any rate, she had an exceptionally lovely face.

The girl beside her was a high schooler wearing a uniform unfamiliar to the college guys. She had a neatly done bob cut and was also quite pleasing to the eye.

They seemed to have a very close senior-junior relationship. Despite the serious impression they gave off, their eye-catching looks made them quite charming indeed.

"Who the heck are they? They seem pretty high-level... Celebrities maybe?"

His friend, who still had his sunglasses on indoors, seemed taken aback as he made an offhanded comment. These were natural questions to have. The blond womanizer sank into serious thoughts of his own.

"I wonder. They're wearing uniforms, so maybe they're just normal schoolgirls?"

"...Must be. How 'bout we make a pass? I'll take the black-haired one on the right."

The man in sunglasses slapped his cheeks to psych himself up. Flirting with girls like these wasn't easy, but they were obligated to give it a shot. This pair were too beautiful to pass up.

"Then the one with the big boobs is mi—"

When the blond man sipped on his coffee and tried to say that, something went *swoosh* past his ear and made him think he was hearing things.

“H-hot!!”

The coffee spilled out of his cup and drenched his fingers.

On closer inspection, a silver needle had pierced the cup through the gap between the man’s index and middle fingers. It was thin, metallic, and around two centimeters in length. The dart had poked a hole in the cup and sent its contents bubbling out.

“A n-needle? Why’s this in a coffee shop...?!”

The man exclaimed about this, shaking off his hand.

His porcelain coffee cup had been penetrated by a needle. Judging from the size, he didn’t think it was the kind you sewed with. If this hit you in the wrong place, you’d drop dead on the spot. Somehow, he sensed that it had been expressly made for just that purpose. It was like a hidden weapon for an assassin or something— “What was that about breasts...?”

The blond man gasped and snapped back to reality at the quiet voice. A high school girl whose short hair covered both sides of her face was standing right before his eyes. The uniform she wore was identical to the one the medium-bob girl at the counter had been wearing.

When the man realized the girl was holding metal darts in both hands identical to the one that had pierced his coffee cup, he let out an incoherent shriek.

His whole body broke out in a cold sweat as he glanced conspicuously at his friend for help. However, what he heard in response was his friend screaming for mercy.

“H-help me...! Someone...help...!”

The man in sunglasses who’d been gearing up to flirt with the black-haired girl was now holding his arm up at an unnatural angle. Against his neck was a naked blade; a tall girl whose long hair was done up in a ponytail had touched a silver long sword against his throat.

“This is why catcalling men are the scum of the earth...!”

The tall girl glared at the man in sunglasses with a look of disgust as she spat

her words in a low growl.

“That’s my Yukina!”

“My Yui!”

““Paws off!””

The tall girl swung her sword upward, and the short-haired girl with the needles brought both hands down.

This time, their undiluted, vivid bloodlust made both men scream from the deepest reaches of their bellies.

“U-uwaaaaaa...!”

“Hiiiiiii!”

Spurred by the primal fear of death, the pair ran away without a single glance back. The girls grudgingly lowered their weapons as they watched them go.

“Hmph... Goodness.”

Shio sourly exhaled as she tucked her concealed weapons back into the sleeve of her uniform.

“Weren’t you a little easy on them, Kirasaka? I don’t think two or three good slices to their carotid arteries would even count as a crime.”

“If you are going to say that, then it’s you who was going easy, Shio Hikawa. Don’t you realize I wouldn’t have had to get involved if you’d just blown them away with a ritual spell artillery attack?”

Sayaka puffed up her cheeks while putting her long sword back into the instrument she used as a scabbard.

The next moment, they heard someone snap their fingers. Both yelped as shock waves struck their foreheads out of the blue.

“What do you two think you’re doing against ordinary citizens?”

The owner of that frosty, exasperated voice was a small-statured girl wearing an elaborate dress. Appearing out of thin air, Natsuki Minamiya coldly chewed out Sayaka and Shio. She must have seen them brandish their weapons to chase off that pair of flirts.

“Owww...!”

“Guuuuh...!”

Thanks to their grueling combat training, Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency were accustomed to pain, but it seemed that Natsuki had cranked up the pain levels on her invisible shock waves to more effectively hurt them. It had worked, too: Sayaka and Shio were paralyzed and had tears in their eyes.

“Shio? Kirasaka, too? What are you doing?”

With a questioning expression, Yuiri, carrying back the drinks she’d ordered, looked at Sayaka and Shio curled up.

“Um...nothing at all.”

“Just driving off interlopers.”

Shio and Sayaka tried to explain this in quivering voices.

Yuri was too pure to realize she was popular. Even as Shio clutched her forehead and moaned, she vowed with renewed determination to protect Yuri from men looking at her with indecent eyes.

“Haaah...”

Yuri stared at the pair with a vaguely concerned expression.

“I wonder, are all the Shamanic War Dancers in the Lion King Agency this dumb?”

Kiriha Kasaki, sitting under a parasol providing shade on the Murakumo Coffee Shop’s open terrace, casually commented with that while gazing at the interior of the establishment through the windows. It was right around when Natsuki was chastising Sayaka and Shio for brandishing weapons against ordinary citizens.

“I have no rebuttal to give.”

Yukari Endou’s black cat familiar replied to Kiriha’s comment. Pets normally weren’t allowed in places that served food, but apparently, they overlooked that here if you sat in the terrace seats outside.

Two girls of the same age hanging out with a cat at a coffee shop made for

quite a sight. Of course, Kiriha and the Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency weren't visiting the café for a friendly get-together. This was where they'd agreed to meet in order to draft countermeasures to deal with the Beast Vassals raging inside Kojou Akatsuki.

It was already a fair bit past one PM.

About ten hours and change remained until Kojou Akatsuki would be released once more. They'd requested reinforcements from the mainland, but thanks to the chaos of the Electoral War, neither the Lion King Agency nor the Bureau of Astrology could mobilize large forces. Chances were high that they'd have to resolve the Kojou Akatsuki incident with only the people they had on hand.

"Here's a hot salted caramel cappuccino for Miss Kisaki and goat milk for Master's cat."

Yukina returned with a tray in hand and served the sighing duo the drinks they'd ordered. Kiriha wore a sardonic smile as she looked up at Yukina.

"This look really suits you, Yukina Himeragi. Why don't you give up being an Attack Mage and become a barista instead? You'd become the star of the shop in no time."

"Ah-ha-ha..."

It wasn't clear if Kiriha had said that out of praise or malice. Yukina hedged her bets and replied with a vague laugh.

Yukina had Nagisa to thank for why she was so accustomed to waitressing. The woman whipped up numerous dishes with an aim-to-please mindset. Ever since she'd started being treated to supper at the Akatsuki residence at nights, part of Yukina's daily routine had become carrying those dishes to the dinner table.

If she couldn't save Kojou, those peaceful days would never return. The thought added to her anxiety.

"Please stop pouring strange ideas into one of our precious Sword Shamans."

Goat milk droplets all around her mouth, the black cat told that to Kiriha while giving her an annoyed glare. She shrugged her shoulders in silence. Yukina

sat down beside her.

It was around then that Sayaka and the others still in the shop came out onto the terrace. Sayaka and Shio seemed crestfallen as Yuii wearily led them in. They were still down from Nagisa's tongue-lashing.

After those two, the next to appear was a girl wearing a slightly askew Saikai Academy uniform, along with a pair of primary schoolers clad in outfits from a famous girls' school.

"Aiba...!"

Yukina looked at her with relief. She'd been worried Asagi would refuse to cooperate after blowing up at Kojou and storming out of school.

"So what's this all about?"

Asagi sullenly turning her iced coffee cup around in her hand while posing that question.

Yukina gave no reply as she looked at Yukari's black cat familiar in search of a lifeline. There was too much she wanted to convey to Asagi, so she honestly didn't know where to begin. The feline, however, was engrossed in her milk. It didn't look like she'd be getting an answer out of her any time soon.

This left Yukina thoroughly at a loss.

"Oh my, Yume Eguchi?"

A smile came over Kiriha when she saw the primary schooler behind Asagi. Her villainous smirk was quite convincing.

"Eep...!"

Yume let out a tiny yelp and froze. Once, Kiriha had used Yume and placed her in mortal peril. The other girl took this as a slight.

"What's with that attitude? It's not like I'm going to eat you. I've always wanted to apologize to you for what happened. Come over, dear."

"Hssss—"

Opening her big eyes wide and going on guard, Yume let out her breath in a hiss at Kiriha, threatening her like a cat. However, this did nothing but amuse

Kiriha as she slowly approached.

“Stop it! You’re just scaring Yume!”

Sayaka thrust herself in front of Yume and glared at Kiriha, somehow managing to avert a larger incident. Yukina nevertheless shrugged at the cloudy prospects ahead. The interaction only fueled her worries about having a proper conversation.

“Um... Why did you even bring Yume and Lydianne?”

Yukina asked Natsuki this in an unintentionally resentful tone. Natsuki, who’d arrived at the table at some point, was grimacing as she sipped her black tea; perhaps it wasn’t to her taste.

“Because they were with Aiba. She was making a fuss about being Akatsuki’s fiancée, so I brought her along. The more girls with a connection to Akatsuki the better, don’t you think?”

“That might well be the case, but...”

Yukina sank into silence, displeasure plain on her face. No matter how much she yearned for Kojou, Yume was still a primary schooler. As far as Yukina was concerned, there was a real problem getting her involved in a discussion about vampire Blood Servants.

“So...? What’s the deal with bringing all these girls who know Kojou together like this? You gonna put us in a locked room so we can go at one another’s throats?”

Asagi inquired about this with a barbed tone. She sounded annoyed that they were beating around the bush rather than getting right to the point.

Of course, Kiriha responded to her taunt.

“My...that would be most enjoyable. In fact, I think you would be the first one to go down if that happened. Is that fine with you, Priestess of Cain?”

Yukina felt sick to her stomach watching Asagi and Kiriha glaring at each other. They were primed to explode at the slightest provocation.

This time, Sayaka didn’t hesitate to stop Kiriha.

Normally, there was no way a civilian like Asagi could win a brawl with a Priestess of the Six Blades, but this was Itogami Island. Asagi had the entire infrastructure of Itogami Island at her disposal, weapons and satellite laser cannons included. On top of that, it was said that Itogami Island, the sorcerous device for The Cleansing, actively protected Asagi because she was the Priestess of Cain.

It would automatically invoke the forbidden spell and rewrite the world to ensure Asagi's survival. Even Kiriha would have difficulty felling Asagi, who would have fortune on her side.

It was precisely because she knew this that Kiriha had conspired to kill Asagi at a time when she was visiting Blue Elysium, but— “Er... Sorry, who are you again?”

Asagi stared straight at Kiriha and asked her this in a constrained tone of voice.

Faced with Asagi's aggressive stare, Kiriha uncomfortably averted her gaze. Since Kiriha had been tasked with eliminating Asagi, she'd obviously been aware of her, but Asagi was clueless about that. This was the first time they were actually meeting face-to-face.

Shio, the first to realize this, went “pfft,” unable to keep herself from bursting into laughter. Yui hastily covered her mouth.

“Pff...khh... Y-you mustn't, Shio. Laughing would be rude to Miss Kisaki...”

“It's just...getting all worked up like that and challenging someone you only just met, that's...”

Both girls' shoulders shook as they spoke in hushed tones to each other.

Kiriha desperately endeavored to maintain her composure despite the circumstance.

“...You have a point. I apologize for my rudeness in failing to introduce myself. I am Kiriha Kisaki of the Bureau of Astrology. Previously, I used Yume Eguchi over there in an attempt to blow you away, along with Blue Elysium. Perhaps you recall?”

“Ahhh... That did happen, yeah. I’ve had so many people trying to kill me I just plain forgot.”

Kiriha’s words made Asagi break into peals of laughter.

Her confident attitude must have really gotten under Kiriha’s skin. She pushed her breasts of considerable size forward.

“Incidentally, I was with Kojou Akatsuki when he went to a hot spring ryokan.”

“Huh?”

Asagi’s face tensed up for the first time since they’d met. She wasn’t the only one who was taken aback, though. Sayaka and Yume and Yui and, for some reason, even Shio glared at Kiriha all at once.

Finally satisfied with their reactions, Kiriha curled her lips.

“Of course, we went there together.”

“Wh-what the heck?! Would you explain this in more detail?!”

Sayaka closed the distance with Kiriha and grabbed her by the collar.

Yui, on the other hand, simply stared at Yukina with confusion.

“Yukii, is it true?!”

“Er, well... It is not exactly a lie.”

“And you were okay with that, Himeragi...?!”

There was a *bang* as Shio slammed the table and stood up.

“There were, ah, various circumstances involved, you might say.”

Yukina gently lowered her eyes as, in an awkward tone of voice, she replied. If she went into detail, it would come out that Yukina had accompanied him to the inn and spent the night with him.

Of course, she’d kept the part about falling asleep while nursing a comatose Kojou and waking up on the same futon with him the next morning out of the report she’d submitted to Yukari, her superior. She really wanted to avoid provoking Kiriha, the only other person who knew that fact, and avoid causing her to spill the beans.

As though granting Yukina's silent plea, a voice suddenly rang out on the patio.

"Ohhh, everyone's here. Sorry to keep you waiting!"

That voice belonged to a woman who wasn't even thirty centimeters tall. Her features were that of a beauty. Carrying her like a doll was a silver-haired girl in a uniform identical to Yukina's. She wore a reserved smile.

"...Who?"

Kiriha glanced toward the doll as if she saw it as a nuisance.

The plaything made an exaggerated nod as if it had been waiting for that exact moment.

"Yes, listen well, girl with the foul look in your eyes. I am the scion of Hermes Trismegistus, master of the Magnum Opus, Nina Adelard of Parmia."

"...This strange creature is Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore?"

Gazing stone-faced back at Nina, Kiriha shook her head with an incredulous expression. Her reaction was only natural. After all, Nina Adelard was said to have been over two hundred and seventy years of age. Having a strangely dressed doll invoke such a name wasn't something to be accepted lightly.

"I take it that means you're Kanon Kanase?"

Kiriha somehow put her thoughts back in order and prompted the silver-haired girl.

"Yes, it is I. Apologies for being late."

Kanon nodded with a soft smile and bowed her head to everyone present.

Kiriha probably had meant to get a few resentful remarks in, but she must not have thought Kanon would apologize first. Her timing thrown off, Kiriha lapsed into an awkward silence. It seemed even she had a hard time dealing with someone as difficult to pin down and airheaded as Kanon.

"—Surely you need not apologize."

The last girl appearing on the patio stepped in front of Kanon to shield her from everyone's gazes. She wore a long wimple over her lengthy white locks.

She moved a hand toward the sword sheathed in the broad scabbard attached to the belt she wore over her Saikai Academy middle school uniform.

“I get woken up and dragged over here, and who do I find? If you intend to lock us in a room and have us go at one another, I’m up for the challenge.”

Shizuri Kasugaya put a hand on the hilt of her sword as she surveyed the Attack Mages before her.

Even in a Demon Sanctuary, having this many Attack Mages and demons gathered in one place was rare. Since no one had explained to Shizuri why everyone was here, it was unsurprising she was wary.

“Ahhh...sorry, we covered that already.”

With an annoyed wave of her hand, Asagi replied to her. Shizuri twisted her lips.

“What?! I am saying I demand an explanation! What do you mean it is ‘covered already’?!”

“You make a fair point. Shall I explain, then? We do not have much time.”

Natsuki, who’d been silent up to that point, suddenly interjected with this.

Everyone fell silent and focused their attention upon her. The girls differed in affiliation, species, and social standing, but one thing united them—they were all related somehow to Kojou Akatsuki.

Gazing upon them all, Natsuki spoke calmly.

“I’ll skip the formalities. Sorry, but I need you to all become Kojou Akatsuki’s wives.”

That instant, the nicely sunlit café terrace seating seemed to creak from the strange sense of tension enveloping it.

5

“W-wives? You mean as in bride, newlywed, spouse—*that* wife?”

Sayaka was the one who responded first. She most certainly hadn’t recovered

from her initial shock. Rather, the impression she gave was of someone so rattled that she was saying whatever was on her mind.

“You mean marrying Kojou Akatsuki?”

Shio followed up to make sure. Though Shio seemed comparatively levelheaded among those present, the fact that she was desperately trying to take a sip of her iced coffee despite the lid getting in her way betrayed that she, too, was quite flustered.

“Relax. It’ll only be a fake union. All you need to do is be with Kojou Akatsuki for tonight.”

Natsuki turned to Shio and lobbed even more suggestive words toward her.

Shizuri was agape, seemingly as hard as stone, but those words made her gasp and return to her senses.

“Wh...what do you mean by this?! A marriage for but a single night?! As a Paladin of Gisella, I cannot approve of such a scandalous relationship!”

“R-right! I mean, what about the ceremony and the reception?”

Shio threw in a statement that was totally off the mark, a testament to her confusion.

Yui gave her sleeve a couple of tugs, taking things in with surprising calmness.

“Cas, Shio... I believe by *wife*, she means being a vampire’s servant.”

“...Huh?”

“A vampire’s Blood Servant?”

Shizuri and Shio blinked hard and stared at Natsuki. “Hmph,” went her curt snort.

“What else did you think I meant?”

“Did you put it like that so we’d misunderstand?”

Yukina sighed wearily, glaring at Natsuki with half-lidded eyes.

“I wanted to see your reactions.”

Natsuki checked the faces of everyone present as she shamelessly fessed up.

Sayaka and Shio were still drowning in shock. Shizuri was visibly enraged. Yui was surprisingly calm, whereas Kanon's face was flushed with embarrassment. Kiriha put her hand against her cheek with a sulky expression, while Yume accepted Natsuki's words as the natural course of events. If anything, she seemed disappointed to hear this was only about being a Blood Servant.

Meanwhile, Lydianne was serenely sipping on some orange juice like this had nothing to do with her. Asagi remained silent, twirling a straw around with her fingertip in apparent tedium. Yukina had no idea what was going through her mind.

"But what would being Kojou's Blood Servant even entail now? I heard he relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor and became a normal human being..."

Shizuri cocked her head and expressed her doubt.

She hadn't actually witnessed the final battle between Kojou and The Blood. Shizuri had been getting her wounds treated at Itogami Island North's Sorcery Lab Number Six. The Lion King Agency's Koyomi Shizuka must have informed her there that Kojou had lost the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

"—There's no way he completely gave it up, right?"

Asagi sounded subdued as she dismissed the idea.

"He may have handed the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor to Avrora, but his body kept vampire characteristics instead of returning to that of a complete human being. Or am I wrong?"

"You realized?"

Yukina looked at Asagi in surprise.

"That's the only way any of this adds up."

Asagi said this like it was obvious. Apparently, she'd already caught on to something that Yukina hadn't realized until the First Primogenitor had pointed it out.

"...Yes. Akatsuki-senpai's body was in an unstable state, neither fully human

nor fully vampire. He was doing so poorly that the First Primogenitor's servant implanted The Blood's Beast Vassals into him."

Yukina explained from the start so that even people unfamiliar with the details could understand.

She hadn't expected this in particular, but Shio and Yuiri were the first ones to raise cries of pure shock in response.

"The First Primogenitor?!"

"The Blood's Beast Vassals? But how...?"

"I see... That's why Zana Lashka was..."

Sayaka was the only one to bite her lip, visibly vexed. Sayaka, who'd fought Zana at Yukina's side, only then realized why she'd appeared in that place.

Zana Lashka had overwhelmed Yukina and Sayaka even while preparing to seal away The Blood's Beast Vassals when he dissipated. Despite the fact they were both taking her on, she'd done this on top of fending off the pair with ease. Consequently, Kojou had gone on a rampage, and they found themselves in the present situation: a crisis threatening to wipe Itogami Island off the map.

"Of course, in his current state, Akatsuki-senpai cannot control the Beast Vassals of The Blood. He has neither the time nor the demonic energy to seize their reins."

Yukina continued on, suppressing the emotions in her voice.

"Indeed. So that is why he requireth companions."

Lydianne, silent up until then, murmured this in understanding.

Yukina nodded a little and placed a silver chain upon the table, the one Zana had employed as a catalyst.

"Miss Nina, can you use this to make rings? We require eleven of them."

"...Goodness, this is Ashglow silver. This is quite a rare metal...!"

"Abbess, you are drooling."

Kanon gently chided Nina when she accepted the chain from Yukina and rubbed her cheek against it in joy. This chain, forged of a metal that resembled

the variety used in Snowdrift Wolf, was actually rare enough to delight even the Great Alchemist of Yore.

“What a shame, though. Were it not for the impurities within, you could trade this amount of Ashglow silver for enough money to build your own castle...!”

“Impurities?”

When Nina spoke with resignation, Kanon inquired further. “Indeed,” said Nina with a nod.

“Kojou’s blood and flesh, I presume. I see—so you mean to build spiritual pathways with this catalyst?”

Divining Yukina’s intent, Nina wasted no time in sending magical energy coursing through the chain.

The links came separated like loosely assembled puzzle pieces. Eleven links transformed into an equal number of rings. They were not encrusted with gemstones, but their unexpectedly elaborate designs were a matter of goodwill on Nina’s part.

“With my ring, this makes enough for twelve—according to the First Primogenitor’s estimates, with this many Blood Serva—no, Blood Vassals, Akatsuki-senpai will surely be able to control the Beast Vassals of The Blood.”

Yukina spoke as the eleven freshly wrought rings formed a tidy circle.

“In other words, we’re supposed to be human sacrifices? To serve as offerings to the Beast Vassals?”

Kiriha provocatively crossed her legs and arrogantly leaned back. Yukari’s black cat familiar made a pained smile and narrowed her eyes.

“We have no intention of forcing you, of course. We lack the authority to force you to do that in the first place. Therefore, all we can do is bow and ask.”

“Is a cat bowing really sincere?”

Kiriha put a hand against her forehead and sighed.

“If Akatsuki’s Beast Vassals run rampant, this island will be blown away without a trace.”

Natsuki Minamiya spoke with a neutral expression. Shizuri's shoulders made a twitch. She'd seen The Blood's Beast Vassals up close enough to realize Natsuki's words were no exaggeration.

"Where is Kojou Akatsuki right now?"

"Giada—the Third Primogenitor—has him locked in another dimension. The time limit is midnight tonight. She told us she cannot hold him any longer than that."

"Not nearly enough time to evacuate the civilians, is it?"

Shizuri sharply bit her lip. She'd already lost one homeland, the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise, to large-scale sorcerous terrorism. Her peers had exhausted all their strength to evacuate every last one of its residents, and all but Shizuri had lost their lives in the process. Perhaps she was being reminded of that.

"Va bene—then I shall offer myself up as a sacrifice!"

Shizuri stood proud and beaming, as though she'd just cleared something from her mind. Despite this, an unexpected individual repudiated her resolve.

"You cannot, Shizuri."

Kanon announced this softly as usual but with a hint of firmness.

"Wh-why not?!"

While Shizuri nervously questioned this, Yukina looked closer and saw that the girl was covered in bandages. The ring and pinkie fingers on her right hand where a ring would go were as firmly immobilized as a battened hatch.

"Are Cas's wounds that bad?"

Yui asked Kanon this in a worried tone. Shizuri seemed a little consternated as she frowned. Thanks to Shizuri having missed out on her chance to explain, Yui had mistaken Cas as her real name.

"Th-this is nothing significant."

"She has four broken ribs and a shattered right ulna, along with contusions, sprains, and torn muscles. Her tendons are also inflamed. To be blunt, it is something of a mystery she can even stand and walk."

The black cat ignored Shizuri's stringent bluff and calmly enumerated her injuries.

Yukina and the others were astonished at how worse for wear Shizuri was. She needed strict bed rest for wounds as bad as those. This wasn't the time for her to be worried about Kojou.

"An ogress's body is resilient, but it lacks the regenerative abilities found in beast people and vampires. The white-haired girl seems to be on a temporary high from the demonic energy provided to her via her ruler privileges."

"This is the blessing of a Paladin of Gisella...!"

Shizuri rebutted Natsuki's dispassionate elaboration with a tiny voice. Yukina had vaguely caught on to this, but when she invoked the paladin's blessing, it was bravado more often than not.

Still, Shizuri insisted she was all right and tried to snatch one of the rings, but she grimaced painfully when Yui and the others intercepted her. With a glance toward Shizuri, the silver-haired girl standing beside her gently reached toward the rings.

"Abess, may I take one of the rings?"

"Huh? Kanon Kanase?"

Sayaka was shocked at how the normally docile Kanon made her decision without the slightest bit of hesitation. Neither raised a word per se, but Kiriha's and Yui's expressions registered surprise as well. They were no doubt thrown off by the gap between the Kanon they knew from the reference materials and what she'd just done.

Nina, however, wasn't thrown off at all. She'd been with Kanon more than long enough to be familiar with her surprisingly decisive disposition.

"Indeed. I'll do this for you."

Nina adjusted the size of a ring to fit Kanon's finger and handed it to her. Kanon placed it on her right ring finger. She looked at Yukina and lifted her palm.

"Now I have one just like you, Yukina."

Seeing Kanon smile happily filled Yukina with a strange emotion. It was tough to peg down as just “joy.” This was a grin fit for the Saint of Middle School. Its incredible potency threatened to make Yukina melt despite being the same gender. Even a berserk Kojou wouldn’t stand a chance against it.

This also meant exposing Kanon to the menace of uncontrollable Beast Vassals.

“Kano, are you really okay with this?”

Yukina inquired about this, half with the intention of scaring Kanon out of it. Her circumstances might have been complicated, but Kanon was different from Attack Mages like Yukina and the others. She was a civilian who just happened to have great spiritual strength. Emergency or not, this wasn’t the kind of dangerous operation she ought to be exposed to.

“If Akatsuki says even I am welcome, I will be delighted to be his servant.”

Kanon, however, fondly embraced the ring on her finger with her left hand.

“Akatsuki has saved me many times over. He rescued Tomekichi and Hassan and Bakuro, too.”

“Eh? Who are they...?”

Yukina’s eyes widened when she suddenly heard those unfamiliar names. As Kojou’s observer, Yukina was worried that he’d gotten into even more trouble.

Kanon, though, happily brought a digital camera out of her pocket and showed off a photo.

“They’re kitties. Akatsuki helped me find homes for them. I was very happy. I have pictures of that time.”

“Wow, so cute...”

“Ha...*snrk*...!”

Peering at the photo, Yui raised a voice of admiration, whereas Sayaka burst out in little giggles while looking at the same photo. It was a photo of Kojou playing with the cats while wearing a goofy expression.

“That was why you decided to be a vampire’s Blood Servant? Isn’t that

kinda...?”

“I feel that the deeper issue is with the choice of names...”

Kiriha muttered this to herself as Shio began to seriously mull over the issue.

“U-um!”

Suddenly, Yume vigorously raised a hand.

“Me too! I want to be Mister Kojou’s servant, too!”

Speaking those words, Yume didn’t bother waiting for Yukina and company to reply before reaching toward the rings on the table. At the very moment she was about to grab one, Yume’s body melted into thin air and vanished.

The next instant, they heard her muffled wail from inside a clump of decorative trees planted on the terrace. Natsuki had teleported her right in the middle of the thicket.

“I forgot to mention this, but the two squirts over there aren’t up for consideration.”

Natsuki, still in a finger-snapping pose, spoke with a lively expression.

“Wh-why not?”

Parting the crackling tree branches, Yume crawled out with her hair and uniform disheveled.

Yukina looked at her and sighed.

“I would think not. It would be a real problem if senpai drank the blood of a primary schooler.”

“You have that right. Forget vampire—he’d be a straight-up perv if he went that far.”

Shio concurred with a completely serious look.

Upon hearing this, Lydianne pouted as though disappointed.

“Then why didst thou bring us along?”

“I thought I made it clear you were just along for the ride?”

Natsuki’s cold stare shut her right up.

It was certainly dangerous to leave a couple of primary schoolers with too much power and mobility to their own devices while they knew only half the story. Above all else, they had the precedent of Asagi participating in a war against the Holy Ground Treaty Organization. Yukina could easily understand Natsuki's desire as an educator not to leave them anywhere out of her sight.

"I don't think now's the time to be saying that when the fate of this island is up in the air!"

Undaunted, Yume mounted an objection. Disturbingly, she really did have a point.

After overhearing Yume and the others' conversation, Shizuri rose up as if to say, *Hear, hear!*

"If you have sufficient Blood Vassals, you need not rely upon primary schoolers, do you?"

"Shizuri, you can't."

When Shizuri proudly puffed out her chest, Kanon softly pushed her back onto her chair.

"Why not?!"

Shizuri desperately objected, and the fact that she'd nearly been brought to tears from just that shove ensured that no one would support bringing her on a particularly dangerous mission.

"Er... Cas really does have a point, though. At a time when the lives of Itogami Island's entire population are in jeopardy, it is no time for a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency to bring personal feelings into the matter."

"Shio Hikawa...?!"

Sayaka was aghast, eyes peeled as she watched Shio grab a ring just like that. Based on Sayaka's shock at Shio's decision to volunteer, she had to have assumed her rival wasn't all that close to Kojou.

For some reason, Shio's partner, Yui, wore a look of acceptance, as if she'd seen it coming all along.

"Is that how things are...? Shio, do you have a thing for Kojou, too...?"

“Y-you’re wrong! As an Attack Mage, this is what I have to do to protect the citizens’ lives and fortunes... Wait, Yuiri, what do you mean by ‘Shio, you *too*’?!”

“Yukii, may I have a ring as well?”

Yuri completely ignored Shio’s cross-examination as she reached a hand toward Yukina.

“...Miss Yuri... Are you sure about this?”

Yukina double-checked as she handed over a ring. *Well, umm*, Yuri’s blushing smile seemed to say.

“Kojou drank my blood before, you see. I—I didn’t mind, I guess?”

“Whaaat?! Wait, Yuri! You mean he really did do that with you back then?!”

“Wha...wha...?”

Shio and Sayaka widened their eyes at Yuri’s shocking confession.

Yuri was flushed, and now Yukina’s cheeks were reddening right beside her. Kojou had drank Yuri’s blood expressly because she’d peeked in on him engaging in vampiric acts with Yukina.

As a strange tension developed between Lion King Agency Attack Mages, Kiriha turned toward Nina, her face dead serious for some reason.

“—Given the occasion, couldn’t you make the designs a little more elaborate? They should rise to this level of luxury at bare minimum.”

“Quite a demanding one, aren’t you, Kiriha...?”

Kiriha showed Nina the results of a smartphone search as a reference as she began giving detailed instructions. It seemed that she was demanding Nina make the design of her ring more extravagant.

“Wait a...?! Even you’re getting one, Kiriha Kisaki?!”

Glancing at the ring in Kiriha’s hand, Sayaka growled. “When did she...?”

“I cannot let the Lion King Agency monopolize a power as difficult to obtain as being the Blood Servant of the Fourth Primogenitor, can I now?”

Donning her completed ring, Kiriha spoke like it was perfectly obvious. She

then smiled in her typically malicious fashion.

“Besides, I have already spent time with Kojou Akatsuki naked. I must make him take proper responsibility.”

“Hrk!”

For some reason, Sayaka projected an aura of defeat as her words caught in her throat.

“Miss Kisaki was wearing a swimsuit the entire time, though she was the only one to do so.”

Kiriha’s expression was completely unchanged when Yukina interjected for the sake of Kojou’s honor.

“Kojou said it turned him on more that way.”

“Is that true?! He said that?! You are not making that up?!”

Yukina turned unintentionally serious as she questioned Kiriha.

That must have triggered something in Sayaka, for her voice went ragged as she tried to compete with Kiriha.

“Wait, Yukina! Me too! Kojou Akatsuki drank my blood before, too!”

“My, what a pity. It seems there are no rings left for you, Sayaka Kirasaka!”

Kiriha quickly concealed the jewelry on the table through sleight of hand. She seemed quite proud of herself as Sayaka grabbed hold of her, breathing raggedly through her nose.

“How can that be true?! Only four people have taken them so far!!”

“Please wait. Before that, give me a ring! I said hand me a ring already!!”

Shizuri dove in and added to the commotion. Yukina and the others watched in bewilderment as a tug-of-war began between them in earnest. Shizuri didn’t back off even an inch against Kiriha and Sayaka, who both employed physical enchantment. Injured or not, that was an ogress for you.

“Goodness. That makes six... And seven if we include the patient in critical condition?”

Natsuki calmly took a head count, completely ignoring Kiriha and the others as their roughhousing continued.

“Somehow, we’ve cleared the halfway mark. If this was a democratic vote, the matter would be settled, but I doubt that would be sufficient to sway The Blood’s Beast Vassals.”

The black cat replied in an equally subdued tone. Natsuki replied with a nod before turning soberly to Yukina.

“Has anyone else had Akatsuki drink their blood?”

“...Of those whom I am aware, Miss Astarte and Miss Glenda—”

“Glenda?! He laid a hand on a girl as young as her?!”

Shizuri, who for some reason was pulling Sayaka’s hair, seemed aghast as she lifted her face.

Yui and Yukina swiftly shook their heads.

“Y-you’re wrong. Er, well, you’re not *incorrect* but...”

“At the time, it was as if Glenda was a ghost haunting us. Akatsuki-senpai ended up drinking her blood despite himself.”

“And you believed a stupid excuse like that?!”

“So gullible...”

Shizuri and Kiriha shot Yukina pitying glances. Yukina, too, thought that it was a stupid excuse, so she could say nothing further in response.

At that moment, Yui gasped, realizing something as she looked all around the area.

“Speaking of Glenda, where is she? Wasn’t she with you, Cas?”

“Ah...”

Yui’s question also clued Yukina into Glenda’s absence. Last she’d heard, Glenda had taken Shizuri and the other wounded ogress on her back to the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s Sorcery Lab Number Six. That was why she had naturally assumed the dragon girl would move in concert with Shizuri.

Kanon, however, gently shook her head with a somewhat dejected look.

“She left during the time Shizuri was being treated.”

“...Left?”

“She went outside without a single word to anyone.”

Shizuri, who at some point had wrested a ring from Kiriha, grimaced from her painful wounds as she explained.

“Given the current state of Island North, we deemed it relatively safe for someone to be walking out alone, so we left the search for her to the guardsmen.”

“I—I see. I don’t think you’re wrong about that but...”

“Glenda... Why...?”

Shio and Yuiri murmured haltingly as they sympathized with Shizuri and Kanon.

“Pointless to brood over who we don’t have,” conveyed Natsuki’s businesslike tone as she continued the conversation. “Astarte cannot become Akatsuki’s Blood Servant because she already has a Beast Vassal implanted in her. I do not know much about this Glenda, though. Just who is that dragon girl?”

“To be honest, we don’t know a thing about her, either...”

Shio spoke limply and hesitantly. Detailed research on the odd dragon girl named Glenda continued even at that very moment at Blue Elysium’s research facility. Presently, however, the more they investigated, the more questions were raised. They still didn’t have any solid information on the girl.

“She has a soft spot for Kojou, so I think she’d help if she came back...”

Yuri hung her head in unease as she spoke, but the gaze Natsuki turned toward her was stern.

“Isn’t the girl’s soft spot for the Fourth Primogenitor, not Akatsuki specifically?”

“I don’t...think so...but...”

Though Yuri had intended to refute her instantly, her response wasn’t very

confident.

“It would seem best not to get our hopes up.”

Kiriha, who’d barely met Glenda at all, coldly shot down the notion. She must have been on the mark because no one tried to refute her. Sayaka, still grappling with Kiriha, merely pinched her cheek without a word. Kiriha responded in kind.

“The other people who’ve had vampiric experiences are Miss Yuuma, and—”

Yukina counted on her fingers as she rummaged through her memories of Kojou’s targets.

Somehow, the fact that he’d drunk the blood of people besides her left a stirring in her chest that wasn’t far removed from the sense that she hadn’t been a good enough watcher. As she recalled these anxiety-provoking memories, Yukina shifted her gaze toward Asagi, who was sitting the farthest away from her on the patio.

“Asagi Aiba? You too?”

Realizing what Yukina’s demeanor implied, Shizuri stared daggers at Asagi. The girl merely brushed the hair from her cheek in reply.

“So that makes nine, then?”

Natsuki’s expression remained unchanged. Yuuma, Kojou’s childhood friend, probably wouldn’t hate the idea of being Kojou’s Blood Servant. Natsuki no doubt reasoned there was no point even bothering to ask. That went double for Asagi, who was always overflowing with fondness for Kojou. However— “Sorry, I’m not going along with this.”

The words coming out of Asagi’s mouth were decidedly not what Yukina and the others expected.

“A-Asagi Aiba?”

Yukina looked at Asagi, her expression not so much one of surprise as complete bewilderment. Shizuri was also consternated for some reason.

“Why won’t you? All this time, I thought you held no hatred of Kojou Akatsuki in your heart...”

“What of it? And what, sit quietly with everyone waiting for him to drink our blood? Don’t be ridiculous!”

Asagi was utterly indignant.

Shio put herself between Asagi and Yukina, gently trying to mediate.

“Um, Asagi Aiba, I understand how you feel, but the lives of Itogami Island’s entire population is at st—”

“Well, they can go eat shit. Why do I have to become a Blood Servant? Though I might consider it if that idiot Kojou bows to me with a bouquet in hand!”

Yukina and the others were at a loss for words as they watched Asagi make that overbearing pronouncement. *Where does all her confidence come from?* they wondered. At the same time, however, they couldn’t help but think this was just like her. After all, Asagi had picked a fight with no less than the Holy Ground Treaty Organization.

“First of all, it’s fishy that getting twelve Blood Servants together is all you need to get the Beast Vassals to obey you. I bet that’s just the First Primogenitor making stuff up as he goes.”

Asagi looked squarely at Yukina as she calmly asserted this. It was like a bolt from the blue to Yukina. She’d taken the First Primogenitor at his word even though he’d implanted the Beast Vassals into Kojou, but she had no hard evidence that was the whole story.

“Do you think he’d be satisfied with *something as boring as that?*”

“Ngh...”

Everyone’s expressions changed, Natsuki and Yukari included. Vampire primogenitors lived for an eternity. They had an incredible amount of time to kill and constantly craved entertainment. Would they really be satisfied watching Yukina and the others move exactly in accordance with the script they had written?

The answer was a resounding no.

Even if they assembled twelve Blood Servants, that alone could not save

Kojou. They needed to discover what was motivating the First Primogenitor's scheme and move beyond his expectations.

"It seems that you have something in mind."

Yukina gazed powerfully at Asagi. Seeing this, the other girl finally broke into a smile.

"There's no guarantee it's gonna work out like I want, so I won't twist your arm into helping. I just think there's a better way to do this than having everyone try to seduce Kojou."

Asagi's blatantly provocative statement caused Sayaka to make a low "ughhh." Yui and Shio sank into a bewildered silence.

The two primary schoolers, however, stood up with sparkles in their eyes.

"It would seem Lady Yume and I might partake of this method."

"What do you plan on doing, Miss Asagi?"

Yukina, Lydianne, and Yume jumping aboard changed the tide. There wasn't any guarantee whatsoever that assembling Blood Servants would save Kojou in and of itself. With that in mind, betting on a riskier method for a much greater return didn't seem like a bad gamble at all.

"I really do dislike you, Asagi Aiba."

Kiriha brusquely swept her hair back as she slowly rose to her feet. She glared at Asagi, but an amused smile came to her lips.

"I should have blown you away along with Blue Elysium."

"Thank you. I take that as a compliment."

Receiving Kiriha's gaze head-on, Asagi raised a palm toward the other girl.

The two then exchanged a vigorous high five like they'd been besties for ages.

Yukina and the others could only stand there, staring dumbstruck at the moment when their bizarre friendship was born.



CHAPTER FOUR RECOLLECTIONS

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RECOLLECTIONS

1

The eccentric acting ruler was holed up in the Goplam's workshop high atop the back of a bizarre sorcerous device.

The machine was completely enveloped in steel plating. It looked like some kind of vehicle.

Instead of wheels, it ran on treads, and there was an inordinately long cylinder-shaped part mounted on it.

Though it had been constructed chiefly in accordance with basic principles, it was also designed with elaborate craftsmanship that betrayed a powerful passion bordering on outright obsession. It made one sense the strong will of its maker or perhaps the possibilities of the machine itself.

The acting ruler wore the garments of a technical officer as he zealously inspected the unfamiliar machine.

"Cain, you're...slacking off on work again, aren't...you?"

The young military officer visiting the workshop made a pained smile as he looked up at the ruler.

He was a small-statured individual with purple hair. At first glance, he looked like a fair maiden, but he was actually a man. On top of that, he was a high-ranking noble whose incredible power had made him famous in Senra. He was one of the eccentrics on par with the city's acting ruler.

"Heya, Aswad. Thanks for your hard work suppressing insurrection."

"It's good that you're safe," said the man called Cain with a little smile, but his hands never stopped fiddling with the device.

Though dejected by Cain's typically obsessive attitude, Aswad found his interest piqued by the machine that had enthralled the acting ruler to this extent.

"What is...this? Some sort of abandoned toy you picked up from somewhere?" asked Aswad.

"It's the weapon Ki and the others returned with from the Eastern Lands."

Cain gave the cylinder on the back of the vehicle a little stroke. Come to think of it, the attachment sort of looked like the thing called a cannon he'd seen in the Eastern Lands.

"Wea...pon?"

"Apparently, it took sacrificing eight beast people to destroy an identical machine. I heard it almost ripped Ki in half, too."

"A weapon crafted by mere men was capable of hurting Ki, you...say?"

Surprise shined in Aswad's eyes. The man named Ki Juranbarada was a famous warrior and a wielder of divine power that few Devas had. No doubt he found this talk of an inferior species like humans being capable of harming Ki quite implausible.

Even the superior race known as the Devas did not know for how long they had ruled the surface. But they were sovereigns and dominators, nevertheless. Their preeminence was absolute, and none could eject them from that position.

Though both species bore a strong resemblance to each other, the Devas had long life spans and resilient bodies, while humans were short-lived and fragile. On top of high athletic ability and physical strength, they possessed the supernatural ability of divine power. Their regenerative capabilities also made them practically immortal.

The Devas had employed their advanced technology to create various lesser species.

They crafted the beast people with high combat abilities to serve as guards and soldiers. They endowed the gigas with herculean strength to construct things and transport materials. They made the fairies so they could have pets

and domestic laborers. They produced the mermen with an eye toward underwater labor. And after that, they crafted innumerable variants of these species.

Using their divine power, they worked the lesser races to the bone, culled violent demon beasts, and constructed vast cities on the surface. Civilization had grown to such a high level that reaching the sea of stars no longer seemed like a mere fantasy.

Though they enjoyed the position of absolute rulers, even the Devas had concerns.

One was the sun.

The instant they were bathed in its rays, the Devas' cellular structure broke down, and they turned to ash. What awaited them was certain death—no, annihilation. Though the Devas had enhanced their already resilient bodies further through genetic engineering, they still had not achieved the subjugation of sunlight.

Another shackle placed upon the Devas was the existence of the race known as humans. The Devas saw humans as a precious source of labor, subjects to be protected, and an important source of *food*.

They needed human blood to uphold their divine power and maintain their vitality.

In essence, the Devas were creatures that could not live without drinking the blood of living persons.

“Yes. This really is an incredible weapon. A mid-ranking noble's divine energy would bounce off this steel wall, and a direct hit from cannons like these could blow away even gigas. On top of that, the driver's seat is completely sealed, so even we cannot invade it in mist form. I imagine even Ki would have quite a bit of trouble if several of these attacked him at once.”

With an excited air, Cain lavished praise upon the weapon they'd obtained from humans, their supposed food source.

“You seem quite...pleased, Cain.”

Aswad said that in a tone rich with sarcasm, but Cain didn't notice the barbs in his words.

"The advancement of technology in the Eastern Lands these last two hundred years has been a marvelous sight to behold. For all their lack of long lives, those humans sure change at a dizzying pace. It won't be long until they arrive at a place beyond even our reach."

"...You are saying that men...will surpass the...Devas? Those frail...creatures?"

Aswad laughed a little with pronounced scorn. Dead serious, Cain shook his head.

"Comparing individual superiority and inferiority is meaningless. The human species acts like a single unified creature."

"Your optimistic way of thinking resembles that of these...humans."

A hint of annoyance came over Aswad's face.

"Human civilization will quickly...collapse. They are incapable of learning from experience... They will wage war upon foolish war, reducing culture and art to ash. So it has always been, so it shall always be..."

"There's no guarantee of that. Even if one life ends, their blood memories live on."

Cain stated this with great confidence. Aswad was perplexed, staring squarely at the odd acting ruler.

"Changes are not occurring only in the residents of the Eastern Lands. The subjects living on the surface are different from those who came before. You all see that, too, don't you?"

Aswad nodded wordlessly.

Some humans were born with a special ability similar but inferior to divine power—fear and rumors along those lines had begun to spread among the Devas living on the surface.

The precise cause of this phenomenon was unknown. Some said it was a result of crossbreeding between Devas and other demons or human beings. Others claimed it was due to interference from some kind of higher-

dimensional being.

Whatever the reason, those who obtained power sufficient to slay even a Deva were known as saints among the laypeople; they were even said to have become objects of worship. Beyond that, the Devas could not ignore the fact that races who were hostile to them, such as ogresses, elves, and dragons, were apparently cooperating with humankind.

Seeing this resistance, beast people and other lesser races had rebelled against the Devas and chosen to fight alongside humankind. The result was insurrection among their subjects the world over.

This was recompense for having treated human beings, whose blood they needed to sip in order to live, as powerless livestock or slaves.

Since they persisted on the blood of their subjects, the Devas would lose their prosperity if they relented their grip on humanity. Reduced to starvation, they would wage war against their own kind to obtain new subjects, placing themselves squarely on the path to extinction.

In order to avoid that worst-case scenario, Deva royalty had devised a plan to strike back—they would obtain new subjects from a world in the far reaches of Nod, the so-called Eastern Lands, the homeland of humankind. In other words, they would place humanity in captivity.

One could mock that decision as foolish or even deem it cruel. They simply didn't know better.

Artificial light already raced through the darkness of the Eastern Lands. Even with the power at the Devas' command, a broad hunt for humankind was no longer an easy feat.

Nor would the dragons protecting the Eastern Lands ever permit the Devas to take back a sufficient number of humans to assuage their hunger. The Devas no longer had the strength left to force them to submit.

"Are we Devas a race doomed to extinc...tion? I wonder, is it our fate to be destroyed by the humans whose blood we cannot live without?"

A small, lonely, self-deprecating smile emerged on Aswad's lips as he posed the question.

“If we Devas reject change, it will come to that.”

Cain spoke calmly without any hesitation.

“Change?”

“Yes. Change so that we can live without drinking human blood, change so that we can walk under the sun.”

“That would be...marvelous. Truly, if such a thing could be...achieved.”

Aswad shook his head like a daydreaming girl.

“But it cannot be...so.”

“I suppose not. The Devas won’t accept change...unless someone forces them.”

A vaguely malicious expression came over Cain as he hopped down from the man-made weapon.

So far as they were concerned, the Devas were a chosen, superior race. They would never accept progress. If one of their own forced it onto them, they would most certainly call him a traitor.

They would call him a Sinful God, a man with the body of a divine Deva who’d nevertheless chosen to side with humanity—

“Hey, Cain...if a day should someday come when the Devas do not require human blood to live...”

Aswadguhl Aziz turned toward Cain and voiced his little wish.

It was a small, truly tiny thing—but it was a fanciful one, a fantasy, and so long as he remained a Deva, it could never be granted.

2

How did it come to this—?

Yuri Haba thought that as she stood still in the lobby of a luxury hotel with hollow eyes.

The time was just past six PM. Less than six hours remained until Kojou

Akatsuki would be set loose once more.

She hadn't seen this herself, but Kojou had transformed into a monster as a result of his Beast Vassal implantation. To be blunt, there was little hope that even a shred of reason was left in him.

The first stage of the plan Asagi Aiba had concocted was to return Kojou to the state of a complete vampire.

It sounded preposterous, but technologically, it apparently wasn't all that difficult. After all, Asagi had The Cleansing on her side. Using the forbidden spell to rewrite the world, she just had to force Kojou's body back to its prior state. Whether the twelve Beast Vassals protecting him would allow her to approach and shoot The Cleansing into him was a different story—but worrying about that wouldn't solve anything at this point.

They had bigger problems. Even if they returned Kojou's body to that of a proper vampire, nothing would be resolved for good unless they stopped the Beast Vassals from rampaging. A vast quantity of demonic energy was required to force another person's Beast Vassals to serve him—he would need enough “feed” to tame them.

That meant they needed to acquire this “feed.” She understood the logic.

What didn't sit well with Yui was that the plan required her returning to this hotel to confront the Second Primogenitor once again. Despite her inner turmoil, the ceremony had gotten underway.

“I heard that Iblisveil had set his eyes upon a human woman... I see—so that was...you, Priestess of Cain.”

He stared down with red eyes at Yui and company from a temporary throne in the back of the lobby. This was Aswadguhl Aziz, ruler of the Middle Eastern Dominion, the Fallen Dynasty—otherwise known as the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer.

“I apologize for the sudden intrusion, Malik. We come today with a request, Your Majesty.”

Asagi Aiba boldly replied with this as she faced the Second Primogenitor. This did not make for comfortable listening for Yui, who was standing beside her.

Yui's lips had gone pale, and sweat was pouring down her back.

She and Asagi were the only two facing off against Aswad.

For some reason, Asagi was acquainted with Iblisveil Aziz, Fifth Crown Prince of the Fallen Dynasty, so with a little convincing, he'd promised to swiftly arrange an audience with the Second Primogenitor.

She'd chosen Yui to accompany her because of the girl's familiarity with the Second Primogenitor's face, nothing more. *Give me a break*, Yui had thought at the time.

Yes, Yui had dined with Aswad. But that was only because she'd lost her engagement with him and was taken captive. He'd held off from treating her harshly because of his warm feelings for her—or rather, because she'd been useful in his schemes. But that hadn't erased the debt Yui owed for having lived to tell the tale after raising her blade against a primogenitor.

For Yui to double back to the Fourth Primogenitor with a request was without doubt a brazen, impudent act.

That being said, few human beings had a connection with the Second Primogenitor, so Yui had been their only option. If anything, this was inevitable. Fallgazer had a reputation for being reclusive, and compared to the other primogenitors, much about him was shrouded in mystery. The value of having met him face-to-face was priceless in a negotiation, however much their reunion weighed upon Yui's heart.

"Very well... Speak."

Aswad smiled seductively, seeing right through Yui's anguish as he prompted Asagi to proceed.

"Then speak I shall. Your Majesty, under the Electoral War of Itogami Island, I request that you become the subject of Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, ruler of Saikai Academy Domain—"

Asagi was undaunted as she calmly laid out her demand before the Second Primogenitor.

That instant, the atmosphere in the lobby went frigid.

The key retainers of the Fallen Dynasty surrounding Aswad and the guards behind them all froze in shock. Only a single person—Iblisveil, who'd arranged the audience—bent over, shoulders trembling, as though he could barely keep himself from bursting into laughter.

“You are telling me to become the ogress girl's...retainer?”

Aswad quietly regurgitated the words. “Correct,” affirmed Asagi, a smile coming to her lips.

Yuri felt like her heart had stopped. No, maybe it really had stopped for a few seconds. Asagi's demeanor was courteous, but her words were arrogant. She didn't think there was anyone who'd asked a primogenitor to become someone else's vassal in all recorded history.

Yuri found the side of Asagi's dignified face vaguely terrifying to behold.

She'd thought this back when the girl had provoked the Holy Ground Treaty Organization into a war, but Asagi Aiba was unfathomable. In addition to nerves of steel, she was crazy smart. She honestly felt it was unfair that Asagi was blessed with the looks of a supermodel on top of all that. One might say she was truly worthy of becoming a Blood Servant of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Still, her opponent was formidable this time. They were negotiating with no less than a vampire primogenitor.

“You filthy human!”

“Such...insolence...!”

“Inexcusable, even for an acquaintance of the prince!”

Cries erupted from the retainers gathered in the lobby. Their eyes shone with half anger and half fear. They were afraid of being caught up in the Second Primogenitor's rage.

However, Asagi received the gazes of disgust trained upon her as calmly as a serene breeze.

“Of course, I won't ask you to do this for free. I have prepared what I believe is suitable compensation.”

Asagi spoke with a distinct grin. Aswad slightly narrowed his eyes. It was not

clear from his expression what he might be thinking.

“So you say you are capable of providing recompense that I, ruler of a Dominion, might accept...yes?”

“O-of course we are. Right, Aiba?!”

Yui checked in with Asagi in a shrill voice in order to escape the terrifying figure before her eyes.

“Of course,” replied the other girl with a nod full of confidence.

Yui hadn't actually heard the details of what this payment was supposed to be. What she did know was that Asagi had said, “Leave it to me,” before hastily getting this and that together. Yui was pretty sure she'd arranged something of considerable value. All she could do at that point was trust her.

Iblisveil's vassals quietly pushed in a cart covered with a white cloth. The compensation Asagi had provided was resting atop it.

“How...intriguing. What is it, I...wonder?”

Aswad leaned his body forward with a sway of his purple hair.

Asagi stripped away the cloth covering the cart and proudly puffed out her chest.

“Curry.”

This must have been what people meant by “stunned out of your mind.” Amid the lobby, which was now silent once more, this whole thing seemed to Yui like it was happening in a world far, far away. Everyone, including the key retainers of the Second Primogenitor and the soldiers of the Fallen Dynasty, froze in shock. Even Aswad was no exception.

Only Iblisveil was smiling, desperately forcing down his laughter.

“Huh?”

Yui's voice finally came out.

As if to trample upon her hope that this was some kind of bad joke, what sat on top of the cart was a commercial-grade rice cooker that had been used to make a stockpot.

“This is European-style curry from Nellore in Island West, which is renowned as the tastiest shop on Itogami Island. They limit this to only twenty per day, and they sell out super quick, but I used my connections as a regular customer to get a pot from them.”

Asagi triumphantly continued her explanation. And yet, the retainers in the lobby showed no reaction.

“M-Miss Aiba...”

Yui grasped Asagi’s shoulders unconsciously, shaking the girl back and forth. Even her endurance was at its limit. With all that had happened, it seemed inevitable that Yui’s head would fly off her shoulders. She just wouldn’t be satisfied if she didn’t levy a single complaint before that moment came.

“Are you an idiot?! You are, aren’t you?! You said to relax, that you had it covered, and this is what you brought the Second Primogenitor as a bargaining chip?!”

Sure, when Yui and Aswad had eaten together, he’d found prepackaged off-the-shelf curry quite delicious. Yui had mentioned that to Asagi. She hadn’t thought anyone would get the idea that it was acceptable to prepare curry for the Second Primogenitor as tribute.

“Wait a... Wh-what?! Just so you know, even royalty can’t eat Nellore curry without an appointment...!”

“That isn’t the point! What’s wrong with you?! Just because it’s a little tastier doesn’t make it suitable for bargaining with the ruler of a Dominion!”

“I’m telling you, this curry isn’t just a little tastier! The shop owner procures his own ingredients and thoroughly steams handpicked meat, vegetables, and fruit for ninety-six hours to develop its robust flavor. Plus, they use a secret specially curated spice to push it to the heights of taste! Even Mr. Ozawa, the leading authority of Itogami Island’s curry scene, said he had to bow his hat to its flavor!”

“Er, who even is this Mr. Ozawa...?!”

“Enough already,” went Yui as she clutched her head in anguish. Despite this, Asagi showed no hint of remorse.

“Also, the rice paired with the curry is an ultra-high-quality variety produced by Itogami Island’s Magiakari brand. They top that off by cooking it with deep seawater rich in minerals! Everything in Nellore curry fits together perfectly!”

“I’m saying, that’s not the pooiiiiiiint...!”

“...Bh...”

A small exhale not even amounting to a whisper interrupted Yuiri’s confounded scream. It had escaped from Aswad. He curled up on his throne, his entire body trembling as if in pain, and then...

“Bhh...bw...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Y-Your Majesty?!”

Heedless of everyone’s stares, Aswad burst into laughter, leaving retainers and soldiers alike to gaze at him blankly, completely at a loss. Their expressions registered shock, terror, and confusion.

This was probably a new sight even to those who had served Aswad for many years. The Second Primogenitor was cackling with tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Curry... You would have me...bend my knee for curry...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Aswad began wheezing from laughing so much. Even so, his fits of giggling did not abate. He continued breaking out in mirth several times over as he remembered what had caused it.

Yuri could do nothing except stand still and watch without a word. Meanwhile, Asagi wore a sullen expression. She still didn’t have a single clue why he was laughing at her.

“H...how many centuries has it been since...I have laughed so... I wonder...? Truly, this island never ceases to...amuse.”

He continued rolling around and chortling for another five minutes. Just as looks of serious worry began to come over his retainers’ faces, Aswad finally sat up straight and quietly put his breathing in order.

He then summoned one of the retainers in attendance behind him.

“Now, General...once upon a time, spices were worth their weight in gold, were they...not?”

“Certainly, though that was quite a while ago.”

The warrior type who had been called general replied in a baritone voice that carried very well. And as one of Aswad’s retainers, he was naturally quite easy on the eyes. His stern, middle-aged looks were like those of a refined actor straight from the silver screen.

His reply left Aswad nodding in satisfaction.

“Then curry made with the ultimate in spices could be considered tribute worthy for a king...yes?”

“Indeed.”

The general nodded curtly. Yuiiri gazed upon that roundabout exchange with surprise.

Surely Aswad did not seriously believe that curry was a tribute equivalent in value to gold bullion. With that brief exchange, however, fiction had transformed into reality.

Now that Asagi had offered suitable compensation, Aswad’s retainers were unable to dismiss her demand as insolence. Next, it was Aswad’s turn to grant her a boon worthy of a primogenitor.

“Very...well, for this one night, the Fallen Dynasty shall venerate the daughter of the Castiellas as its liege.”

Aswad made his pronouncement in a regal tone of voice.

Crushed by fatigue, Yuiiri felt a little dizzy but earnestly kept her psyche in one piece. Though they’d just barely managed to succeed in making the bargain, they were still in an audience with the Second Primogenitor. There was no telling what kind of unreasonable demand Aswad might make on a whim.

“However, I have one...condition.”

A suggestive smile came over him, as though he was teasing the already wary Yuiiri. Her shoulders trembled. “Kuh-kuh,” Aswad chuckled in amusement.

“You shall join me for supper to...night. As we indulge in this curry, you will take your time and tell me the details of your...scheme.”

“With pleasure.”

Asagi nodded with a radiant smile.

3

A huge map was projected in the ruler’s chamber on the topmost floor of the Goplam. It was a chart of the entire surface world.

Seven-tenths was ocean, and three-tenths was land. Once upon a time, nearly all that land had been under Deva rule.

Currently, however, the areas under their control had been reduced by some six-tenths of that as a consequence of both demon and human rebellions.

The long-running conflict had resulted in the loss of numerous cities and lives of the Devas dwelling therein. At this stage, the decline of the Devas was clear for anyone to see. Reports of their defeat in battle had grown quite commonplace.

Nevertheless, the report that day delivered a heavy jolt stretching from the surface all the way to the isolated realm of Nod.

“The Ubide territory was destroyed?”

Ki Juranbarada, lying in an ill-mannered fashion on a long chair, sat up in surprise. He was a tall military man with a dauntless face.

Ubide was a principality located in the center of the old continent. It prospered as a critical pathway between east and west and possessed a powerful military force. He’d heard that the rebel army’s invasion had grown fierce, but he’d been certain the territory would not have gone down with ease.

“What happened in just three days? The rebel army on the old continent doesn’t have that kind of firepower, right?”

Ki turned toward the map with a sober look in his eyes.

The dots of light on the chart represented Deva cities, and the arrow markers

represented rebel army units. There were no lights in the Ubide region. Both the cities and the military units had vanished without a trace.

“Duke Mehelgal used Beast Vassals.”

Cain spoke quietly while glancing down at his carnelian stone tablet. He was usually so laid-back that his now-solemn tone made him seem like an entirely different person.

“Beast Vassals, you say?”

Ki’s temple twitched.

Beast Vassals were creatures summoned from another world, masses of demonic energy so dense that they could physically manifest.

On top of possessing enormous power, they were nigh immune to physical attacks. Birthed from Deva technology, these creatures were the ultimate weapons of destruction.

The Devas had strictly prohibited the summoning of Beast Vassals. This was because they were simply too powerful to be employed as tools of warfare.

A single summoned Beast Vassal could burn a city or a forest to cinders, alter the terrain, and trample all life-forms in the vicinity, both friend and foe alike. Even the Devas, with their divine energy, found controlling them no easy task. When Beast Vassals went berserk, no one could stop them. They were truly calamities.

Duke Mehelgal, ruler of Ubide, had resorted to summoning Beast Vassals and lost everything as a result: friend, foe, and even the land he ruled.

“They probably panicked when the Nalakuvera invasion threatened their state capital. The rebel army and the Grand Alliance nations seem to have begun summoning Beast Vassals of their own.”

“Tit for tat, huh? They just might go that far.”

Ki casually glanced up at the ceiling. Beginning with the sky-soaring tanks known as Nalakuvera, many of the weapon systems developed by the Devas had already fallen into rebel hands. This was only natural, for it was the demons and humans the Devas had regarded as lesser races who’d actually built the

machines. Now that a Beast Vassal had been unleashed in the Ubide territory, the rebel army would relentlessly seek to procure them as well.

To oppose this, the Devas would be compelled to use Beast Vassals once more. There was no way to stop the gears that had been set in motion. The flames of war were certain to spread.

“I imagine so. According to Giada and the others, the dragons seem to be rather on edge.”

“That figures.”

Ki sighed with annoyance at Cain’s statement.

The increasing ferocity of the war with the rebel army had resulted in a pronounced increase of the influx of Deva refugees to the artificial isle of Senra. With humans slipping away from Deva rule one after another, it was growing increasingly difficult to secure blood plasma. If this kept up, the starving Devas would inevitably be forced to invade the Eastern Lands. The dragons who guarded the region were wary of this possibility.

“Hey, Cain...at this rate, what’s gonna happen to the Devas?”

The head of Senra’s garrison forces asked this of its acting ruler.

Cain sighed at length as he gazed at the place on the map where the lights had vanished—the ruined territory of Ubide.

“The true terror of Beast Vassals, even more horrifying than their destructive power, is their contamination of memories. When Beast Vassals escape control, they steal ‘information’ without limit from sentient life-forms around them to maintain their physical forms.”

“Information...memories, huh?”

“By the time they run out of feed to consume, the Devas will probably be no more. At the very least, they will no longer hold the power to maintain their civilization.”

“I see. That’s not limited to us, though, is it?”

Ki snorted in displeasure.

A summoned Beast Vassal didn't vanish on its own after destroying its initial target. They kept on stealing the memories of the living in the area to maintain their materialized states.

People whose memories had completely vanished lost even their zeal to live and wasted away until they finally perished. This phenomenon was indiscriminate, affecting Deva, demon, and human alike. Beast Vassals were egalitarian destroyers.

"With us, we're reaping what we sowed, but when we think of the other races getting nailed, we can't just sit by and let it happen, can we? So what do we do about it?"

Ki looked at Cain, who was atypically serious.

It wasn't his usual playful expression. Born into royalty, Cain's repeated disregard of decorum and other aberrant actions had finally ended in exile to Nod. It was he, the Devas' foremost eccentric, in whom Ki placed his trust. The same no doubt went for Aswad and Giada.

Put another way, only these four could change the Devas' fate.

"Once a Beast Vassal is summoned, it is very difficult to annihilate via outside interference. Even if you slam one into another, it will result only in the victor growing more powerful from absorbing the loser's energy."

Ki spoke in his normal tone of voice as if it was someone else's problem.

"There has to be a way. Haven't you already thought of one?"

Ki tenaciously countered. "Hmm," went Cain, sinking into a bit of thought.

"Logically speaking, the simplest method is mutual annihilation through slamming demonic energy with opposing, higher-dimensional energy. That is why I went and completed the Divine Oscillation Wave activation ritual."

"That stake? Or is it a spear? Well, it doesn't really matter."

Ki recalled the silver-colored sorcerous device Cain had shown him on a previous occasion.

The Divine Oscillation Wave activation ritual—a sorcerous device that could rend any barrier and nullify demonic energy certainly would be effective against

a Beast Vassal.

“Devas and demons created by the Devas cannot use it, however. The only ones who can operate it are the human mutants known as saints.”

“...So the people who are already trying to kill us anyway.”

Cain rested his cheek against a palm in annoyance.

The saints, of human flesh yet able to wield spiritual energy, were the Devas' mortal enemies.

Even if it was for neutralizing the Beast Vassals, handing them Cain's sorcerous devices would end up tightening the noose around the Devas' necks.

Regardless, he'd probably hand them the spear as a last resort. You can't use a spine in place of a stomach. The Beast Vassals devouring the surface world was simply that grave a threat.

“Are there any other options? Do we have to rely on humans?”

Ki seemed to get his thoughts together as he inquired.

Cain mulled things over a bit before finally murmuring as if he'd reached some kind of decision.

“If they cannot be destroyed, our only choice is to seal them.”

“Seal? But aren't these monsters that can burn away whole cities in an instant?”

“We don't have to physically confine them. Even if they can manifest, they are masses of demonic energy by nature. We need only force them to possess someone.”

“Taking a memory-eating monster into your own body? Just the thought gives me chills.”

Ki made an exaggerated shudder of his shoulders. If Beast Vassals were masses of demonic energy, it was far from impossible for them to possess a living creature. Ki didn't think there was a living creature capable of enduring the strain, though. Even the bodies of the Devas couldn't handle the backlash from a Beast Vassal's demonic energy.

Cain, however, was surely thinking the following: If that being didn't exist, then he would make one.

He also had the Holy Flash at his disposal, a forbidden spell able to rewrite the laws of the world.

"To a Beast Vassal, sentient life-forms who engage in social activities exist so they can feast on their information, so to speak. That means if they're compatible with a host, the beasts should politely obey. If one person isn't enough, we just need to pair them with more people to broaden the information."

Underpinning Ki's hypothesis, Cain continued to ramble. He'd thought of a way to save the surface world from the menace of summoned Beast Vassals long ago.

"Pairing?"

The unfamiliar term threw Ki off.

"I mean marriage, albeit in a magical sense. Perhaps we might call them Blood Servants?"

"That sounds like a royal pain in the ass."

"Ahhh, of course I wouldn't mind if it is polygamy or with the same sex."

"That's not the part that bugs me."

"Good grief," went Ki, a strained grin coming to his face as he prompted back.

"So you stick a Beast Vassal into someone. Then what?"

"You don't need to do anything. If it's a weak Beast Vassal, it will vanish when the host dies."

Cain spoke in a tone like it was no big deal.

"And the strong ones?"

The look in Ki's eyes grew sharper. Cain met his disarming gaze without any change in his expression.

"Their power will wane with time. If part of a Beast Vassal is allotted to children and grandchildren, it should be possible to weaken them with

successive generations.”

“I get the logic, but this is some real long-term thinking. It’s not like you at all.”

Ki muttered his true feelings, which brought a lonely smile to Cain’s lips.

“If there is one problem, it’s that the Beast Vassals won’t let their hosts die under any circumstances. That will only change once the Beast Vassals have completely lost their power.”

“Even if you cut off their heads?”

Ki’s voice was tinged with surprise as he double-checked.

“Yes. Even if the hosts’ hearts are pierced, or they’re burned to the core, or they’re dashed into tiny pieces, the Beast Vassals will refuse to let them expire. Aging is out, too. Relying on memories from the time of possession, the host will be revived in their original state over and over until the Beast Vassals are depleted of demonic energy.”

“Then you’d be completely immortal?”

“I suppose so, particularly for the primogenitors first possessed by the Beast Vassals.”

Cain’s lips twisted in anguish.

From that expression, Ki understood everything. Cain had wanted to make himself the vessel for the Beast Vassals, but that couldn’t happen. After all, he was the one and only wielder of the Holy Flash. He couldn’t overwrite his own existence with a spell he himself unleashed. That’s why he wanted Ki to be a primogenitor in his stead. The same probably went for Aswad and Giada.

Ki alone wasn’t enough to purify the Beast Vassals soon to be used in every corner of the world. It would take three primogenitors at minimum.

Until freed of the curse of the Beast Vassals, they would live as monsters for an eternity. Ki and company were probably the only people crazy enough to accept turning into that.

“Not sure if that’s a good or a bad thing, but that kind of life’s definitely gonna be boring.”

“I think you’ll have quite a bit of fun with it, though, don’t you?”

“You’re the last guy I wanna hear that from. Hey you...”

Ki slowly shifted his gaze to the third individual in the room.

Standing there was a young boy of around twelve or thirteen years old. He was not a Deva. He was human. Ki didn’t know what had possessed Cain to take the boy on the verge of death into his care, but he refused to drink his blood and was raising him with great diligence. Cain had not only taught him to read but was also having him help out with ruler work these days. The boy came off as cheeky in a good way, something Ki was rather fond of.

“You think so, too, don’t you, *Mizen—Number Zero of the Kaleid Bloods?*”

When Ki inquired, the boy looked a little conflicted before making a reserved nod.

4

“Astarte, current time?”

Natsuki Minamiya curtly posed the question to her blue-haired homunculus assistant.

The girls were at the Itogami Harbor container base located at the tip of Island East. This was where Kojou Akatsuki was scheduled to be freed. They’d chosen this vast stockpile as the place to do it because the damage to the end would be minimal if a fight with the Beast Vassals broke out.

“It’s 11:37 PM. Roughly twenty-three minutes until the start of the operation.”

Astarte replied flatly with this. Even though her wounded body had only just finished being retuned, her demeanor was completely unchanged. Information about the incident occurring on Itogami Island had already been uploaded to her brain during the time she was sleeping in the tuning vat.

“Resident evacuation status?”

“There are no civilians within a one-point-five-kilometer radius. All roads into the operational area have been blocked by the Island Guard. Simplified magic

barrier coverage of the population is at ninety-six percent.”

“So this is the best we can do, is it?”

Natsuki sighed with a neutral expression.

Even if the Itogami Harbor container base was vast, they were still up against The Blood’s Beast Vassals. If those things wanted to, they could blow away an Itogami Island–sized landmass with ease. Simplified barriers from the Island Guard were little more than comfort blankets.

If they could, Natsuki would have preferred to fight in a place far removed from the city. Unfortunately, that was not possible. Asagi Aiba could only employ The Cleansing while on the island.

“Do you think we stand a chance, Witch of the Void?”

The black cat resting atop Natsuki’s head asked this with an irresponsible air.

“Why ask me? Isn’t a large-scale sorcerous calamity on this scale under your jurisdiction?”

“I thought it was your pupils who drew up this plan?”

“Sorry, but it’s my policy not to bring my teacher work home with me.”

Natsuki spoke with cold nonchalance. The black cat made a pained smile and narrowed her eyes.

“Well, I don’t think of this as pushing the responsibility onto those girls. No one could have seen this coming, so we cannot expect any support from the mainland with problems coming from above.”

“I suppose not.”

Natsuki clicked her tongue a little as she glanced up at the silhouette of the inverted artificial isle floating in the sky. The gate to Nod had opened once more.

Self-Defense Forces helicopters were charging through that gate. In response to Itogami Island’s request, the government of Japan had decided to dispatch its SDF Special Attack Mage Regiment.

The Special Attack Mage Regiment’s assigned mission was to eliminate

invading armed forces. In other words, they were taking the position that MAR Inc., with Shahryar Ren at the helm, was not a sorcerous criminal organization but rather a national enemy.

As a result, the Lion King Agency, an anti-sorcerous terrorism organization, was cooperating with the SDF, providing most of its fighting strength in the process. Considering the destructive power at MAR Inc.'s disposal, sending the SDF in was unavoidable, and the Lion King Agency had no objection to bolstering its forces.

This did, however, reduce their capacity for dealing with threats on the surface. In other words, they had to take on The Blood's Beast Vassals with only the people available on hand.

It'll be a tough fight, Natsuki and the cat's grim expressions seemed to say. Just then, they heard a busy patter of steps that broke the tension.

"Sorry for being late! Are you all right, Yuiri...?"

"I-I'm okay... The Second Primogenitor just didn't want to let us go... Uuu, my stomach hurts..."

Shio Hikawa and Yuiri Haba were short of breath as they ran over.

Despite being minutes away from a battle, Shio was out of breath, while Yuiri was pale and clutching her stomach. The stress from the earlier negotiations with the Second Primogenitor seemed to have done a real number on her tummy.

"It appears that the discussion went well...?"

"Yeah, somehow... But the curry was really, really spicy..."

"...Curry?"

Her subordinate Attack Mage's silly-sounding remark made Yukari fall silent, a conflicted look on her face.

Natsuki sighed wearily and shifted her eyes toward the blue-haired homunculus.

"Astarte, you understand your current situation, yes?"

“Affirmative.”

Astarte nodded without any change in expression.

Though her retuning may have finished, she’d only just recovered from grave wounds that had put her at death’s door. Moreover, Kojou relinquishing the power of the Fourth Primogenitor had severed the spiritual pathway between him and Astarte. She couldn’t use his demonic energy to summon her Beast Vassal. To do that, she would have to whittle down her own life force.

Astarte understood this full well, yet she continued treating this like the natural thing to do.

“I will restrict Beast Vassal usage time to the smallest extent possible to maximize operational uptime.”

“...”

Natsuki opened her mouth to say something, but she swallowed her words midway.

Even though she was a homunculus under protective custody, Astarte was not Natsuki’s personal property. She had a right to determine how to act of her own free will. If she had resolved to fight for Kojou’s sake, Natsuki had no right to stop her.

That’s why she said just one thing.

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

Natsuki spoke in a businesslike tone.

Astarte seemed grateful, lifting the corners of her mouth so slightly it did not even amount to a single millimeter. Then she spoke.

“Accept.”

Standing on the northern tip of the container yard, Sayaka Kirasaka crossed her arms in annoyance. The source of her irritation was Kiriha, who had strode over with her head held high despite arriving way behind schedule.

“You’re late, Kiriha Kisaki!”

Why am I paired up with her? lamented Sayaka internally, her words

drenched with obvious dismay.

As a matter of fact, there was a very good reason to pair the two together. The ritual spells Sayaka and Kiriha specialized in were highly compatible. Both had various ranged attack incantations. On top of that, they could use bulwarks created with pseudo-spatial severing as a powerful means of defense.

If either of them was using a ritual spell artillery attack that required a certain amount of time to charge up, the other could take the front line and fend off enemy Beast Vassal attacks. This allowed for a combination of offense and defense without any exploitable openings.

Provided, of course, that they actually worked as a team.

“I’m so sorry. We were showering very thoroughly. Right, Yume?”

Kiriha lifted her long black hair, showing it off as she sought agreement from Yume Eguchi beside her.

The scent of shampoo and soap clung to Kiriha and Yume; they definitely smelled like they had just gotten out of the bath. Yume slid a hand through her hair as she nodded, looking only slightly apologetic.

“Also it took a while to pick the right underwear... Wanna peek?”

Kiriha lifted her sailor suit to expose her belly right up to the point at which her bra would be visible. Sayaka carved a very deep crease into her forehead.

“No, I don’t particularly want to see that... And why shower at a time like this in the first place?”

If a fierce battle broke out, they’d get covered in dust and sweat for sure. So *why?* thought Sayaka, cocking her head.

Kiriha, however, looked at Yume like it was Sayaka’s question that was strange.

“I mean, Kojou Akatsuki might be drinking our blood after this? I don’t want to gross him out because I reek of sweat. Besides, we just might be doing things that go even beyond that.”

“Th-things even beyond that... Why you!”

You don't say that in front of a primary schooler, Sayaka thought nervously, but Yume was quite calm about it.

Yume was actually a succubus who could manipulate the lust in other people's hearts. She was extremely mature for her age, so this kind of lightweight talk didn't bug her at all. If anything, she was a little put off that Sayaka was treating her like a kid.

It was then that Kiriha shifted her gaze to Sayaka's neck out of the blue.

"Well, you've already done it with him, so he may not mind if you're a little smelly."

"I—I do not smell!"

After her reflexive retort, Sayaka quietly added in her heart, *Probably*.

When she calmly thought back, she had no memory of taking a bath since returning to Itogami Island. That wasn't her fault, though. After parachuting down from a moving airplane, she'd wandered New Itogami Island, gotten into a fight at an MAR base, parachuted out of a helicopter, and after she and the First Primogenitor spent some time pummeling each other, here she was about to fight Kojou Akatsuki's Beast Vassals—when exactly did she have time to bathe? She was on the verge of collapsing from overwork.

The current operation did not have Kojou drinking Sayaka's blood as part of the plan anyway. Of course, it was possible the operation wouldn't go as expected, and what girl wants to stink, plans or no?



Sayaka was stressing about all this when Yume abruptly changed the topic.

“Miss Sayaka, how was your first time with him?”

“By ‘first time,’ that’s him drinking my blood, okay?!”

Sayaka was a bit flustered as she corrected the girl.

“I guess it was kind of like going to donate blood? It was to save Itogami Island and Yukina, so there was no other way...”

“You blatantly seduced him with your huge boobs, didn’t you?”

“Keh,” went Kiriha, practically spitting out her words as Sayaka rebutted.

“I did not! When it happened, Kojou Akatsuki was giving me a bridal carry, and then...”

“Oh my, look at the time. We’d better get in position.”

“Wait a... Listen until the end, would you?! I’m still in the middle of talking!”

Sayaka unwittingly raised a shrill voice when the conversation was broken off midway without her consent. Just as Kiriha said, though, it really wasn’t time for useless banter.

When Sayaka puffed up her cheeks and took out her long sword, Yume had some kind of thought and nestled right up against her.

“Y-Yume?”

“It’s all right. You smell good.”

She pulled her face close to a tuft of Sayaka’s hair and broke into a grin.

“Yume...!”

Her angelic smiling face deeply moved Sayaka, but then Yume went up to Sayaka’s ear and whispered a warning in a cold, glacial voice.

“But I am Mister Kojou’s fiancée. Make sure you do not forget that.”

As she looked up at the steel-colored city floating overhead, “Hmmm,” went Nina’s audible voice of admiration.

“So that is the gate to Nod? A tad plainer than I expected.”

Nina's carefree words brought a gentle grin to Kanon's face. Even the appearance of Nod, an event taking sorcerers around the globe by storm, didn't rattle the Great Alchemist of Yore one bit. Apparently, she'd imagined a gate hovering in midair would come with spectacular fireworks or the like.

"Father feared *the being that will come from the other side* of that world so greatly that he changed me into a Faux-Angel so I might escape the surface."

Kanon spoke in a hard tone of voice. Her adoptive father Kensei Kanase had conducted the blood-drenched Faux-Angel ritual because he feared the terror that would someday assault the surface world. Even the Fourth Primogenitor, calamity incarnate, was less frightening to Kensei than that thing.

Kanon wore a clouded expression, but Nina shot her a sunny smile.

"Worry not. I am with you. When Kojou Akatsuki recovers, he shall lend his strength as well. You are not alone."

"—It is precisely so, Your Highness the Royal Sister."

Strongly agreeing with Nina's words was a woman who appeared without any warning.

The young woman with short-cropped silver hair looked like she was in the military. Her modified army garb with chain mesh was somehow reminiscent of a ninja outfit.

"Oh, you. You're back."

"Yes, late that she is, Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina has returned."

Responding to Nina's fond voice, Justina went down on a knee and lowered her head.

Justina was one of the Knights of the Second Coming serving the Royal Family of Aldegia. She'd been dispatched to Itogami Island on the orders of Princess La Folia and had been serving as Kanon's bodyguard since last year.

Justina had remained in the homeland to help with mopping up the recent rebellion occurring in the kingdom of Aldegia, but with the lifting of Itogami Island's flight restrictions, she'd returned to protect Kanon once more.

"Welcome back."

“I am honored to receive your kind words.”

Greeted by Kanon’s smiling face, Justina was so fiercely moved she went, “Khkh!” and wiped away a tear. She then produced a gleaming gold ornament from a chest pocket.

“Pardon me, but it would seem the Royal Sister is about to enter the field of combat. Please take this with you.”

“...Ooh, a bracelet...”

Nina displayed interest faster than Kanon could manage. Perhaps it had stirred her alchemist’s blood. She patted the bracelet tendered by Justina all over when her eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

“How...could...this metal...? It’s from the Age of the Gods?!”

“This is the Shield of Skuld, one of the great treasures passed down in the Royal Family of Aldegia. The queen mother has asked that I hand it to the Royal Sister.”

“The queen mother...?”

Kanon gasped in surprise.

Though its name referred to a shield, the bracelet itself wasn’t very big at all. It was as large as a man’s wristwatch at best, and save for a wing design etched onto its surface, its ornamentation was subdued.

If it was enough to excite Nina, it must have been forged a very long time ago. Kanon didn’t know how it had been forged, but the surface of the bracelet was not dulled whatsoever, gleaming as beautifully as the day it had been crafted. She could understand why it was in the royal family’s treasury.

“I gratefully accept.”

Kanon put the bracelet on her wrist. Nina stared at it with such force she seemed ready to drool.

“K-Kanon, please...lend me that bracelet. Just...just for a little bit!”

“Miss Justina, there is one thing I wish to ask.”

Kanon ignored Nina getting excited all on her own as she posed that question

to Justina.

“Anything.”

Justina kept her head bowed as she replied.

“—Is it only you who came back to Itogami Island?”

Kanon’s casual words, spoken as if she saw through everything, made a chill run down Justina’s spine.

That was all the confirmation she needed. Even if Kanon had the smile of a merciful angel, this silver-haired, blue-eyed girl was without a doubt a member of the Royal Family of Aldegia. This was what made her a liege worth serving, even if it meant Justina had to wager her life.

Lifting her face up to Kanon, Justina smiled without a word.

Kanon nodded slightly and turned her eyes toward the northern sky with a look of satisfaction.

Yukina wore a white, full-length hooded mantle as she gazed at the sea.

Next to her stood Shizuri, clad in an identical cloak.

Even though a strong sea breeze was blowing, it wasn’t enough to make them cold. That Yukina and Shizuri did not remove the mantles in spite of that was a consequence of what they were wearing underneath.

They’d been told any extra measure, however unorthodox, might prove to be the trump card needed to save Kojou. They’d been told the efficacy was in question, but it was worth a try. They understood the underlying logic.

They understood why, and yet—

“It is fine for you, Miss Kasugaya, but do I really need to wear this...?”

“Perhaps I could change right now,” pleaded Yukina with an air of resentment.

“Absolutely not! And is it okay for me to wear this?!”

“That’s, ah... Yaze said bringing Akatsuki back to his senses would be the key to tonight’s operation, so anything that would even slightly raise our odds of succeeding is worth a try, yes?”

“I remember accepting that proposal when he brought it up, but thinking back upon it now, I cannot help but feel we have been deceived...”

Shizuri seemed mortified as she nibbled on her fingernails. Apparently, she had also vaguely realized that something was off.

Yukina sighed as she stared at Shizuri’s appearance. The ogress girl’s limbs were faintly shaking. Yukina had little doubt this was not due to stress alone. By all rights, she should have been resting because of her serious injuries.

“Um, Miss Kasugaya, are you all right?”

“I am... Wait, why do you ask?”

“You are not forcing yourself? Um, Miss Kasugaya, you are the one who will shoulder the greatest burden in tonight’s operation after all.”

When Yukina inquired in apparent concern, Shizuri looked back with a conflicted expression. Instantly, she nearly spoke words of bravado but thought better of it and shook her head.

“...I am in the same position you are.”

“Eh?”

“I was Kojou’s watcher as well. Onrai Island may have been a false, artificially constructed world, but in my own heart, Kojou is my observation target even now. He is like a little brother I cannot turn my eyes away from. He’s my precious comrade, and my...”

“Miss Kasugaya...”

Shizuri’s abrupt confession made Yukina blink in surprise.

With a theatrical gesture, Shizuri pushed out her chest with a powerful flutter of her mantle.

“Therefore, there is no reason for you to be considerate. Saving Kojou is my natural right as well as my duty. I shall offer myself up as his Blood Servant or whatever else he requires. If anything, it is my duty as a paladin to observe this troublemaker for the rest of eternity!”

Shizuri declared that with a bright and cheerful tone of voice. Yukina stared at

her awkwardly. She hadn't thought such a weighty proclamation would fly out from Shizuri's lips.

"No, I...um, Miss Kasugaya, what I was asking about was the state of your wounds..."

Averting her eyes with pronounced embarrassment, Yukina spoke in a tiny, subdued voice.

"Hah?!"

Realizing she'd gotten the wrong impression, Shizuri's fists trembled.

"Wh-wh-why did you inquire in such an ambiguous fashion?! Did you do that on purpose?!"

"Y-you are mistaken! And was it really that ambiguous...?!"

Yukina hastily shook her head. She thought it was only natural to check on a teammate's physical condition before the start of a battle.

Shizuri, however, was beet red to the tips of her ears.

"I will not forgive you for causing me to speak such an embarrassing confession! Now that it has come to this, you must lay yourself bare as well! How do you feel about Kojou?!"

"A-as his watcher, I of course feel for him in various ways—"

"I am asking you how you feel about him as a woman!"

"Er, errr—"

Shizuri closed the distance with impressive force. Yukina gingerly backed away. There was no sign of the angry ogress backing off, however.

How did it come to this? thought Yukina with anguish as she earnestly sought the words that would offer her an escape.

"Are you okay? You seem tired somehow."

When Yukina and Shizuri arrived at the rendezvous point several minutes later, Asagi glanced at them and asked them that with a suspicious air. All the two could manage was to make a pair of listless smiles.

The vast container base was a square approximately two kilometers on each side. Yukina and the others had assembled on its eastern edge.

Waiting together for Yukina and Shizuri were Yaze, Asagi, and Lydianne aboard her red robot tank.

Yuiri and Shio were on the south side. Sayaka and Kiriha were on the north side.

The west side nearest to the city was being covered by Natsuki and Astarte. Their formation was arrayed like an encirclement to seal Kojou's Beast Vassals from all sides.

Though they lacked direct combat capability of their own, Kanon and Yume were participating as backup personnel. Yaze was handling communications and operational command. The special ability he possessed was highly dependable despite the vastness of the battlefield.

"Um, everyone else?"

Yukina forced a change in topic to keep Asagi from pursuing the matter.

"Everyone hath already arrived at their positions."

Lydianne politely replied while holed up in her tank cockpit.

"I really would have loved two or three more people to lend a hand."

Asagi, riding on the back of the tank, murmured this with visible chagrin.

In a scant few minutes, the Third Primogenitor would release Kojou.

Yukina and company's plan was simplicity itself. Asagi would approach the monsterized Kojou and pump him full of The Cleansing to change him back into a complete vampire.

The operation couldn't reach the next stage unless and until that initial hurdle was cleared.

The problem was Kojou's summoned Beast Vassals.

So long as they protected him, Asagi wouldn't be able to approach Kojou. To use The Cleansing on him, someone had to serve as a decoy and pull the Beast Vassals away.

At present, however, there were too few people to distract the creatures—not even one person per Beast Vassal. Yukina and the others had to take on a fight that put them at an overwhelming advantage from the start.

“Rui and Yuno said they wanted to help, but...”

Shizuri lowered her eyes in regret. Rui Miyazumi and Yuno Amase were civilian Attack Mages of excellence that belied their youth, but their combat style wasn’t geared toward fighting Beast Vassals. Rui’s sniping attacks lacked the overwhelming firepower required, and Yuno’s physical strikes had no effect on the creatures to begin with.

“It is only normal to lack attacks that would work against primogenitor-class Beast Vassals, after all. I am most grateful they offered their cooperation to begin with.”

Lydianne followed Shizuri up with complete seriousness. Her words conveyed not consolation but hard facts. Even the Island Guard had barely any Attack Mages capable of standing against The Blood’s Beast Vassals.

“At any rate, we’ve prepared all we can. The rest depends on where Kojou shows up.”

Yaze said this casually. Asagi’s operation was so simple that there wasn’t a whole lot to set up beforehand. The rest was down to where he showed up first. At this point, the only thing Yaze felt like he could do was pray.

Asagi stared down sharply at Yaze from the back of the tank.

“Incidentally, Motoki...are these clothes reaaaally going to work? You said Kojou would bite for sure, so I dressed them up against my better judgment, but...”

Asagi raised her eyebrows as she glanced at Yukina and Shizuri and the mantles they wore.

The lower edges of the cloaks were fluttering in the strong sea breeze. Peeking out from those edges were thighs wrapped in stockings and bodysuits that hugged their curves. They had white cuffs around their wrists and were wearing bunny-ear headbands under the hoods.

In other words, they were wearing bunny girl outfits.

“You can trust me on that at least. Their job’s to seduce Kojou after all.”

For some reason, Yaze was crisp and firm about this in a tone brimming with confidence.

Yukina and Shizuri glared at Yaze with half-lidded eyes. They’d reluctantly dressed up like that because he’d made the case that it was what they needed to save Kojou, but they just couldn’t suppress the feeling that he’d pulled the wool over their eyes.

“Why bunny girls in the first place? What, were swimsuits not good enough?”

Asagi voiced a very sensible question. *I might have resisted fighting Beast Vassals in a swimsuit, too, but at least that would be better than a bunny suit*, thought Yukina.

Yaze shook his head, decisively refuting the notion.

“Swimsuits are sportswear. You can’t turn Kojou on with workout outfits like that!”

“...So why are bunny girl outfits better?”

“Bunny suits are outfits explicitly designed for the purpose of attracting male attention.”

Yaze asserted this, but the girls weren’t really sure it was a compelling argument.

“Um,” said Yukina, bashfully raising a hand. “I haven’t seen Akatsuki-senpai express interest in bunny girls to date...”

“Perhaps this insistence on bunny girls is merely your own personal interest?”

Shizuri turned a skeptical gaze toward Yaze. *No, no*—he refuted this with an exaggerated shake of his head.

“That’s not true at all. If these outfits don’t work, the problem is with you all, not the cloth— Hey, don’t point cannons at people!”

Yaze let out a shriek when he realized Asagi had trained the cannon of the tank toward him.

Yukina's shoulders sank as she sighed deeply.

"I am sorry—may I change right now?"

"I regret to report the time hath come, Lady Sword Shaman."

With one sentence, Lydianne cruelly dashed Yukina's hopes.

It would soon be midnight—the Third Primogenitor's appointed hour.

As Yukina and the others cast hesitance aside, their tension was already rising when a ripple-like sway in thin air appeared before them.

Yukina and Shizuri immediately drew their weapons. But the people who materialized a moment later were not who they'd expected to see.

"—Sorry to keep you waiting. Looks like we made it just in time."

A boyish figure wearing a sports brand parka sunnily waved in Yukina and company's direction. This was Yuuma Tokoyogi, Witch of the Blue.

Yuuma, in the custody of the Attack Mage Section, was unable to act of her own volition. Yaze and Natsuki must have pulled some strings to get her to aid them.

A wielder of spatial control magic similar to Natsuki, Yuuma was a dependable ally even against Beast Vassals. Yukina's expression brightened at the appearance of reliable assistance that she didn't think would arrive in time.

Her expression froze solid when she noticed the other girl Yuuma had brought along.

She was a petite girl wearing a Saikai Academy uniform. Her long black hair was tied up in a short ponytail, and she had a lively air about her.

"Nagisa?!"

Yukina's voice shook with surprise. Shizuri widened her eyes in shock.

"Why is she here...?!"

Asagi glared intensely at Yaze. He shook his head, dumbfounded. This hadn't been his idea.

"Ahhh...about that. Actually..."

Yuuma scratched her forehead with a conflicted air. Apparently, she hadn't really wanted to bring Nagisa along, either. Since Yuuma found it difficult to explain, Nagisa stepped in front of Yukina and spoke instead.

"I went looking for Yuuma and asked her to bring me!"

"...Why?"

Yukina seemed fearful as she asked. Even if she was Kojou's little sister by blood, she wasn't a demon or an Attack Mage. It was far too risky to let her get close to rampaging Beast Vassals; however, anger hovered in the serious eyes Nagisa turned toward Yukina. It was an emotion Yukina had never seen from her before.

"After everything that happened, Kojou's in another really bad situation, isn't he?! And you and the others are trying to do something about it, right, Yukina?! Then of course I'm helping! Asagi and Yuuma and even Kanon's lending a hand, right?!"

Yukina was overwhelmed, unable to speak one word in response to Nagisa's tirade, the likes of which she had never seen before. She wasn't the only one shaken by it. Asagi and Yaze were genuinely pale, and Shizuri had stiffened as if frozen solid. Lydianne hushed her breathing inside of the tank.

Such was the severity of Nagisa's anger.

When she fell silent, large teardrops began to spill out of her eyes.

Nagisa was right to be angry. Her older brother was hovering between life and death, but she was the only one here who'd been completely left out of the loop. She was justified in blaming Yukina and the others for that.

"Nagisa pretty much knew the whole situation anyway. She saw the living room was a mess and checked things out on the spot."

Yuuma explained this with a sigh.

"Checked out? Ah...?"

Yukina suddenly remembered something she'd heard from Kojou. Mimori Akatsuki, the Akatsuki siblings' mother, was a medical psychometer. Kojou had also said Nagisa, her daughter, had inherited this ability.

Nagisa practically never used it. The ability itself wasn't all that useful, and she probably had no interest in prying into the secrets of other people's pasts to begin with. It was also highly possible she had been strictly forbidden from using this ability by her grandmother Hisano Akatsuki. The antagonism between the Akatsuki family's bride and mother-in-law was so famous that even an outsider like Yukina knew about it. She had no doubt whatsoever Hisano was prejudiced against Mimori due to her ability.

Surely even Nagisa couldn't keep herself from using the ability after seeing the sorry state of the living room in her own apartment. After all, the bloodstains from Kojou being pierced through the heart were plain for all to see. Nagisa learned what had happened to her older brother when she touched that blood.

Yukina opened her mouth to apologize to Nagisa, but she bit her lip, unable to say anything.

The sudden change occurred a moment later.

"Ladies and gentlemen—! Demonic energy reaction! It is enormous!"

Lydianne shouted this urgently.

The caliber of the air over the vast container base shifted. The incredible demonic energy made the earth quiver and sent electric crackles through the sky. Dazzling, golden mist gathered together, changing into the form of a beautiful girl in the center of a wide-open area.

As arranged beforehand, the Third Primogenitor—Giada—had appeared with the sealed Kojou in tow.

"Motoki!"

Asagi angrily shouted this toward Yaze.

"Yeah, I get it. I'll look after Nagisa. You all go on ahead as planned. We're out of time!"

Picking up Nagisa, who had gone rigid with shock, Yaze angrily shouted right back at Asagi. Like Nagisa, he was a Hyper Adapter—a psychic who could control the atmosphere, in his case. Even if fighting a Beast Vassal was a no-go,

he could manage grabbing her and hauling her to safety. He was able to use wind pressure to bolster his physical strength a great deal.

“—The Blood Servants of Kojou Akatsuki, I take it?”

Vast amounts of demonic energy scattered about as Giada spoke in a solemn tone.

The energy was not her own. Her Beast Vassal’s seal had been breached. Kojou was breaking out.

“It is the appointed hour. Show me...what you are made of.”

The moment Giada finished speaking, the air creaked with a thunderous roar.

A furious gust was whipped up by the enormous mass of what emerged, unleashing a malevolent light that illuminated the night sky.

Bundles of demonic energy dense enough to possess wills of their own—the black Beast Vassals—appeared before them.

A single monster stood at their center. It was a grotesque creature clad in a pitch-black exoskeleton.

“—Himeragi, Kasugaya, let’s do this!”

Asagi climbed into the robot tank as she shouted.

“Yes.”

Gripping her silver-colored spear, Yukina stripped off her mantle. She had no right to be embarrassed by the bunny suit she wore exposing so much of her body.

“From here on, this is *our* fight.”

Gripping the shaft of her lance, she murmured that as much for her benefit as anyone else’s.

Drawing her undulating crimson long sword, Shizuri briefly howled in response.

“Indeed!”





CHAPTER FIVE
BLOOD RED

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BLOOD RED

1

The steel-colored city was on fire.

This artificial metropolis, the quintessence of highly matured technology, was burning to the ground.

The beautiful skyline, the public transport pathways tracing geometric, spiraling arcs, the Goplam tower standing tall—all were scarred and crumbling to pieces. The sky glowed red from the blaze. Even the sea was dyed crimson.

Yet amid destruction of such scale, the city was strangely silent.

There were no voices to be heard—no screams, no cries of anguish or resentment.

The city's population, purported to exceed a million souls, no longer dwelled on that island.

In a far corner of the deserted ruin, the last two men left behind faced off against each another.

One was a Deva. The other was a human...no, a youth who was human no longer.

“—Brave hero, you have my compliments for making it this far.”

An innocent, teasing smile came over the Deva man's lips as he spoke those words.

He was slumped against the wall of a collapsed building.

Fresh blood trickled out from his pale-blue lips.

His chest bore a deep gash. The internal organs that should have been there

had vanished without a trace. Even with the vitality of the Devas, he was beyond saving. They were mortal wounds that no one could treat.

“Is this really the time to joke around, Cain?”

The other man shouted this weakly. Tears flooded out of his eyes. They were bloody tears of anguish and regret. The spear made a dry, hollow sound as it fell to the ground. It was a silver lance, its tip drenched with blood.

“Why? You knew it would come to this. Why did you...?!”

“I did as I pleased—that is all.”

A small grin came over the wounded man as he murmured. It was the same gentle smile he’d worn since way back.

“Those twelve special Beast Vassals are the only ones I cannot entrust to Ki and the others. They already have enough of a burden to shoulder.”

“Couldn’t you of all people have come up with a better way?!”

The youth fell to his knees before the man. He shook his head as he gazed fondly at the crying youth.

“No, this is for the best. You’ll probably understand that soon enough.”

The man smiled cheerfully as he lifted his head. His gaze fell on the creature perched atop Goplam’s peak. It was a huge dragon with a silvery mane.

“Glenda, I’m sorry. I entrust the rest to you.”

Hearing the words the man spoke like a prayer, the dragon made a small nod.

The dragon was embracing a number of young human girls, who each clutched a carnelian tablet in turn. These were priestesses who Cain had raised.

Seeing that the girls were safe, he let out a heavy, satisfied sigh.

The next moment, a dazzling light shone upon the side of his face. The sun of Nod was about to poke its head over the horizon of the vermillion water. Soon it would be daybreak.

“Cain!”

The youth instantly moved to shield the man.

Yet he faltered when the wounded man turned his serene eyes upon him. The youth bit his lip in silence. He remembered. This was the wounded man's final wish. This was the sight he had dreamed of seeing.

"Ahhh, so beautiful. So this is...the light of dawn..."

The man murmured with the innocent wonder of a child.

Bathed in the light, his body began to collapse like a pile of sand.

"Farewell, Fourth Primogenitor. I pray for the happiness of whoever inherits your Blood Memories—"

"Cain—!"

Kojou Akatsuki shouted as he remembered.

These were the memories of the youth, the *artificial vampire* who had once been the Fourth Primogenitor.

Dragged along by those memories, Kojou was seized by anger, sadness, and despair.

The Beast Vassals dwelling in Kojou's blood increased their power in response to those dark emotions.

They howled as they attempted to force their way through the prison of darkness that encased them.

Space creaked. There came a sound of something shattering.

The cell door opened. Light shone through.

And so the beasts were released unto the land of the Demon Sanctuary, unto Itogami Island, once more—

2

Shio Hikawa had lost her father at the age of six. He'd worked as an Attack Mage for the police and had lost his life shielding civilians during the suppression of a sorcerous terrorism incident.

Her memories of her father were already vague, and she barely remembered

speaking to him at all. Nonetheless, Shio imagined it had a lot to do with her setting her mind on becoming an Attack Mage for the Lion King Agency soon after.

The black shadow served by twelve Beast Vassals landed at the center of the open area.

It had misshapen horns and an exoskeleton-like armor. Crimson eyes glowed from within.

It was a grotesque monster, seemingly the incarnation of the hatreds of all peoples.

“That...terrifying sight... Is that really Kojou Akatsuki...?!”

Both Shio’s hands trembled as she stared at the pitch-black monster. She wasn’t afraid. She was quivering with intense anger.

“Shio! Let’s go!”

Yuri raised her silvery long sword and leaped toward Kojou. She and Shio were facing off against Beast Vassals encircling him. Their plan was to peel the creatures off him and pin them down. Shio understood that was her role, but she just couldn’t take her eyes off Kojou.

Initially, she’d thought Kojou was just an average boy.

He was lazy, hadn’t learned any magic at all, and even his grades were just barely acceptable. His face was, well, okay, but she really didn’t think he was a good match for an amazingly beautiful girl like Yukina. He was an ordinary person you could find just about anywhere. Any resemblance to his ridiculously audacious father was strictly in passing. That’s what she’d thought.

And yet, Yukina, Sayaka, even Yuri—all those girls had fallen for Kojou after getting to know him. Even Glenda was fond of him. This had been utterly incomprehensible to her.

The day the Unknowns attacked Itogami Island, however, her entire conception of him was flipped on its head.

He’d defeated the nigh-immortal demon beasts with the brute force method of feeding them his own demonic energy.

His accomplishment left her feeling awed and dumbstruck. One false step and he would have been the one eaten, but Kojou had carried out such a dangerous maneuver without the slightest hesitation.

That was when Shio finally realized her mistake.

She'd thought that the boy with the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire was mediocre. That itself was not normal in the slightest.

Kojou didn't use the power of the Fourth Primogenitor for himself. The thought never even crossed his mind. But if someone else needed saving, he would put himself in harm's way.

People who acted that selflessly were either mere idiots or the truest of kings. Kojou lived so recklessly that Shio couldn't just sit back and watch.

She had the power to support him, too. She wasn't the weak little girl she used to be.

"Rosen Chevalier Plus, Boot Up—!"

Yuri raised her long sword and faced off against a Beast Vassal.

To the front of her was an enormous minotaur. It was the vampiric Beast Vassal of the earth, epitomizing the tales associating vampires with tainted soil.

Yuri used a pseudo-spatial severing bulwark to stop the battle-ax made of pitch-black magma in its tracks, then—

"Boot Up—!"

She drew a second long sword from her hip. Shio was dual-wielding a pair of Rosen Chevalier Pluses. Unlike Sayaka's Lustrous Scale, these weapons were lightened, mass-produced versions whose transformation mechanism had been scrapped, making such a brute-force technique possible.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Yuri's second slash rent the minotaur's huge frame diagonally from the shoulder on down.

This had virtually no effect against the Beast Vassal since it was an amalgamation of demonic energy. Nevertheless, her attack could buy time until

the creature regenerated.

That's my Yuiri, thought Shio with a smile. She was proud of her best friend's kindness and strength, hence—

“—Request confirmation! Freikugel Plus, Armbrust Mode, Unlock!”

Shio poured all the ritual energy she could muster into her weapon. This was no bow, however. This was Freikugel Plus's alternate, concealed form—a siege crossbow.

She combined the mass-produced versions of the Type Six sword and bow, changing them into an arbalest capable of erasing time and space itself.

“Freikugel Plus, Armbrust Mode, Active.”

In the arbalest's line of fire was an enormous, shelled beast enveloped by pitch-black mist. This was the Beast Vassal governing a vampire's ability to turn into mist, and it could turn everything it touched to vapor. It probably had the widest attack range of The Blood's twelve Beast Vassals. Since its body was composed of mist, physical attacks would be ineffective, but with Shio's crossbow—

“Eat this!!”

The beam Freikugel Plus unleashed transformed into a spear that impaled the Beast Vassal. Anything the blast touched disappeared without a trace. The beam had taken a bite out of the Beast Vassal's shell-encased body, along with the very space it occupied.

“Seems like it's working...right? Question is how long we can hold out,” Shio murmured as a stout smile came over her face.

Though both Shio and Yuiri's attacks were effective against even these powerful Beast Vassals, each said to rival natural disasters, this equilibrium would not hold for long. Their ritual energy was limited, whereas the Beast Vassals had an inexhaustible supply of demonic energy at their disposal. If Kojou wasn't back to normal before they hit their limits, the Beast Vassals would annihilate the island that very night.

“Yukii, please...!”

She saw Yuiri speaking as if in prayer.

Shio added a plea to Yuiri's and raised her crossbow once more.

"—Awaken, Rheingold!"

Natsuki commanded her shadow in a lofty tone.

Out from the rumbling earth emerged an enormous knight statue clad in golden armor.

It was a golden clockwork knight. From within the pure darkness encased inside of the thick armor, a monstrous roar emanated, along with sounds of enormous gears and pistons in motion. This was a devil's familiar, the Guardian of a witch, and the symbol of the power Natsuki had obtained with her pact at the cost of selling her soul.

Natsuki stared at the twin-headed dragon ahead. This Beast Vassal governed vampiric avarice and gluttony. The abominable pitch-black dragon dropped precipitously toward her.

She shot steel chains out from thin air, but the dragon consumed the bonds with its giant maws before they could wrap around it. Even the Dromi, sorcerous devices of the gods themselves, were no more than cotton candy to it.

"The Dimension Eater, able to consume space and anything within it? I imagine even Gleipnir cannot bind it."

Natsuki snorted sharply as she teleported to put distance between herself and the twin-headed dragon's jaws. If she unleashed her Guardian's true power, it was hardly impossible to subdue it by force, but that would cause immense damage to the surrounding area. Natsuki was young but had sacrificed too many of her wishes to a devil—enough that they could bring great disaster unto the world.

As long as she kept her Guardian sealed, it would not have the strength to deal effective damage to the two-headed dragon.

In that case, thought Natsuki as she deployed a spatial control magic circle right in front of her. From this, she summoned a jet-black bulwark to serve as a

shield against the Beast Vassal's attacks.

The dragon tried to consume Natsuki despite her shield, but the instant it tried to clamp its jaws down on it, the creature let out an agonized roar.

“—Take a bite out of your own body.”

A cruel smile came over Natsuki's beautiful, doll-like face as she spat out the words.

She had used her bulwark to warp space and link it to the dragon. Natsuki gazed pitilessly at the Beast Vassal driven mad from consuming its own flesh as she shot out her chains once more.

“Kiriha Kisaki, I'm leaving that one to you!”

“...Huh?”

When Sayaka Kirasaka spoke up and turned her defenseless back toward Kiriha, the other girl stared, scarcely able to believe her eyes. Sayaka and Kiriha weren't friends—far from it. In fact, they weren't even coworkers in the same organization. She still resented Sayaka for sending her flying and preventing her from accomplishing her mission. To be fair, though, Kiriha had pounded Sayaka and knocked her unconscious prior to that. Either way, their mutual animosity remained unchanged.

In spite of all this, Sayaka had just entrusted Kiriha with her back. The word *naive* didn't even begin to cover it. *Idiotic* was her honest impression.

What irritated Kiriha above all else was that she understood exactly how Sayaka felt. She didn't like Sayaka's personality. She didn't like that her breasts were bigger and her legs longer than her own. Sayaka's silky hair, long eyelashes, and graceful nose bridge really got on her nerves. Nevertheless, Kiriha had to acknowledge that she was so capable, she could let Sayaka have her back and trust everything would be all right—

“Well, since you're the one asking, none of that really matters... Really throws me off my game.”

Truly irritating, Kiriha thought as she lifted her lead-colored forked spear.

Her hands were tied. She truly had no choice in the matter but to protect

Sayaka from the oncoming Beast Vassal before them.

Before them was a pitch-black mermaid—an Undine. The artificial ground she touched broke down and reverted to mere soil. It was quiet destruction without sound or heat, but its incredible force was terrifying. The Beast Vassal epitomizing a vampire's regenerative ability was able to revert anything it touched to atoms. For all its lack of visual spectacle, it was perhaps the most troublesome of the twelve.

"This black liquid... It's an ultra-reversion ability, it would seem..."

Kiriha pouted as she watched the mermaid corrupt the earth. It had the power to change the shape of any substance, which from a different angle, was the power to destroy any substance. Stopping its attacks would be no easy task.

Kiriha, however, curled up the corners of her lips as she thrust her forked spear into the body of the slithering Beast Vassal. *Ting*, went the ear-grating, vibrating echo as the resulting explosion blew the creature's body back.

This was the resonant destruction ritual that Unknown IX-4 had controlled. Kiriha's Ricercare could reproduce any ritual her opponents had used in battle.

Its anger over the interference plain, the mermaid focused all its attention upon Kiriha.

She beat back every single one of its blows. The resonant destruction's super-oscillation fended off the mermaid before it could activate its ultra-reversion. However, the Beast Vassal was too huge for Kiriha's strikes to reach its torso.

"This isn't cutting it... And it's got such ridiculously destructive capabilities. But..."

Kiriha sighed slightly as she gazed at the chipped tip of her forked lance. The slightest of touches from the Beast Vassal had reduced its ritual magic-reinforced metal to this state. She knew these things were strong, but the Beast Vassals of The Blood were more destructive than anything she could have imagined.

Seizing the moment, Kiriha opted to retreat before her forked spear became completely useless. The least she could do was lure the Beast Vassal away from Sayaka.

The thing was, she and Sayaka were on the cape of the artificial isle. Kiriha was sprinting toward a dead end, and the mermaid would make up the distance in no time. Despite this, she wasn't showing any signs of anxiety.

After all, if she closed the distance, that meant *she could predict the enemy's route of moment*.

"How unfortunate... Quelling big ones like you happens to be my specialty."

Murmuring quietly to herself, Kiriha activated the ritual spell she'd prepared.

A number of containers scattered around the area split open to reveal a variety of weapons.

These were giant lances with steel-colored tips, their length exceeding five meters with ease. They probably weighed a hundred kilograms or more. Their thickness was over three times that of any normal lance. They were arrayed to surround the jet-black water maid.

Kiriha was a Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology, a specialist in anti-demon beast combat. If anything, fighting an opponent far larger than herself was her specialty.

"Hmph, a healing Beast Vassal. Your abilities really get on my nerves—*Flat!*"

Detecting Kiriha's ritual energy, the lances fired as a single volley accompanied by trails of light.

With a roar sufficient to paralyze the eardrums, the massive container yard shuddered as blast winds raced across its surface.

Flat, the trump card of the Bureau of Astrology, was actually a railgun on par with naval guns of cutting-edge warships. Miniaturized or not, the lances firing supersonic rounds pulverized the huge water maid with overwhelming kinetic energy.

All the same, a Beast Vassal was a mass of demonic energy, so physical attacks were meaningless. Though the water maid had scattered to pieces, it would soon revive as if nothing had happened. But that was more than enough time.

"You sure like making a scene, Bureau of Astrology."

Sayaka glanced at Kiriha's valiant fighting while firing a silver ritual arrow. Der Freischütz was a ritual spell artillery cannon. Its shots had enough might to rival large-scale ceremonial ritual spells, but the violent winds unleashed by the pitch-black Beast Vassal batted it away with ease.

"Figures I'd get pushed back in a head-on clash."

Sayaka murmured ruefully while darting to escape the Beast Vassal's counterattack.

Her opponent was a pitch-black bicorn enveloped in raging winds. The Beast Vassal represented the vampiric ability to manipulate storms. It was a simplistic foe that could do nothing but scatter strong winds, but it could cause so much damage she would have preferred not to fight it regardless. To be blunt, she wanted to cut and run, but...

"Kojou Akatsuki... Yukina..."

Sayaka turned toward the center of the open area. She could make out Kojou, transformed into a grotesque monster. She also saw Yukina charging into a horde of Beast Vassals in order to save him.

Sayaka clenched her left hand, upon which she wore a silver-colored ring.

She couldn't let the bicorn get in Yukina's way.

"I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee!"

Sayaka raised her bow, despite the fact that it left her completely exposed.

The pitch-black bicorn's attacks were just like her artillery blasts. For all its power, Shio's crossbow attacks couldn't reach this Beast Vassal. Only Sayaka, who had the longest attack range, could hope to stop it.

"Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!"

Her silvery recurve bow unleashed a ritual spell artillery shot with all the ritual energy she could pour into it.

The bicorn calmly intercepted the blast head-on. The gale unleashed by the Beast Vassal blew Sayaka's blast like it was nothing, and the accompanying shock sent her flying back and rolling to the ground.

A tiny stone dancing in the wind made a shallow gash Sayaka's cheek. Nevertheless, she wore a smile on her face.

"You let your guard down...!"

The ritual spell artillery attack that should have dissipated instead assaulted the bicorn from an unanticipated direction.

Sayaka's Lustrous Scale had one more ability—pseudo-spatial severing.

Der Freischütz was able to employ spatial severing of its own creation to freely alter the angle and trajectory of its own ritual spell artillery attacks.

The shot she'd fired head-on was one of three arrows Sayaka had fired simultaneously. This was Full Burst, the ritual spell artillery attack Shio Hikawa specialized in. It was slightly inaccurate, but if Shio could manage to land it, then Sayaka could, too.

The initial attack had been offset by the Beast Vassal's blast, but the second struck right after from an unexpected direction. As for the third cursed arrow Sayaka had unleashed—

The time-delayed third ritual spell artillery attack she'd sent flying slammed the bicorn into the ground.

"I did it..."

Sayaka sighed in relief as she stood up. The look of surprise that appeared on Kiriha Kisaki's face when Sayaka had shot it down felt pretty good, too.

It wasn't over yet, though. Her attack wasn't enough to kill a Beast Vassal. That was why she'd needed to use every trick in the book to pin it in place.

Sayaka took a new cursed arrow out from under her skirt and nocked her recurve bow.

That instant, she recoiled in fear as she felt someone's powerful gaze upon her.

There was a new Beast Vassal—a beautiful aquatic dragon covered in pitch-black scales.

"You're not alone anymore," he had told her.

“You’re gonna live a happy life till the day you die.”

Deep down, even Yume knew that hadn’t been a marriage proposal.

As Sayaka was fighting a Beast Vassal, a pitch-black aquatic dragon appeared in front of her. Its forelimbs were translucent wings, and it had enormous horns like that of a ram. Caught by surprise, Sayaka was unable to evade the Beast Vassal’s attack.

The instant she realized this, Yume flew out without a single thought.

She spread wings woven with demonic energy and extended the tail that were characteristic of succubi.

Even she thought it made her look indecent, unsightly. Yet he’d stared right at Yume and said, “And having a tail on you like that is kinda cute, ain’t it?”

He probably hadn’t realized how lifesaving his words had been. She hadn’t been able to give him an honest reply, but the truth was, she was so happy she could have cried right there.

When Yume said she wanted to marry Kojou, not a single person took her declaration seriously. Even he probably thought her insistence that she was his fiancée was the delusion of a child.

Beyond that, Yume had numerous rivals, formidable ones all. She didn’t think that a few years of growing would make her cuter than Yukina, smarter than Asagi, or as incredibly stylish as Sayaka. Why was Kojou surrounded by such wonderful people? It irked her. It truly irked her.

Nevertheless, he’d kept his promise.

When he met Yume, who’d wanted to die for as long as she could remember, he’d changed her destiny.

Because of him, she’d enrolled at a Demon Sanctuary school, made friends, and the Yaze family treated her like one of their own. It was fun taking care of demon beasts at school. Life on Itogami Island was very busy, but Yume could puff her chest out and firmly declare she was happy.

That was why she felt it was her turn. Even if she was young and powerless, she’d save Kojou from his plight and turn her promise of marrying him into

reality.

“—This Beast Vassal!”

Noticing Yume giving off demonic energy as she approached, the pitch-black aquatic dragon turned its attention toward her.

That instant, she realized the Beast Vassal’s ability was mind control, the vampiric power of Charm. It was the same as her succubus ability.

“Yume?!”

A look of shock came over Sayaka when she realized Yume was flying right in front of the Beast Vassal. In her current situation, however, Sayaka was in no position to help.

Besides, even she couldn’t fend off a Beast Vassal’s mental attack. Yume was the only one who could stand up to it.

“I won’t let you get in our way.”

The Beast Vassal unleashed incredible demonic energy. Its physical attack power was virtually nonexistent, but its effect upon the psyche was tremendous. If she lowered her guard for even an instant, it would take her soul, leaving her an empty vessel.

Yet Yume took the Beast Vassal’s attack head-on.

A rampaging creature was no match for the Queen of the Succubi.

“Do not underestimate the power of the Witch of the Night...Lilith, the World’s Mightiest Succubus!”

Yume wrung out her demonic energy. She commanded Riru—the other her sleeping at the very bottom of her soul—to lend her strength. The power of Lilith could dominate even Leviathan, a living weapon created by the gods themselves. It was not to be taken lightly.

“I’m the one who’ll make him happy—!”

The pitch-black aquatic dragon swayed. The Beast Vassal was a mass of demonic energy so dense as to possess its own will. As long as it was sentient, however, it would still be vulnerable to Succubus mind control.

“Kneel before meeeee!!”

Yume strained her voice into a scream.

Seemingly obeying that voice, the jet-black aquatic dragon slowly sank down to the bottom of the sea.

“Your Highness!”

Sword poised, Justina glared at the Beast Vassal standing in front of Kanon.

Towering over them was a massive sheep with a body of black gemstones. Dark crystals hovered all around it. Thanks to its coat of diamonds, the divine sheep could not be harmed by any attack, and anyone who tried would have their blows reflected back at them. The Beast Vassal represented the vampiric curse of immortality.

“You must not strike.”

As Justina’s blood stirred, Kanon stopped her with a gentle tenor.

Nidaros, the sword Justina gripped, was a treasured blade with the power of purging and healing granted to a maiden in service to the Royal Family of Aldegia. But even this weapon would be unable to defeat a Beast Vassal of The Blood. If Justina attacked the Beast Vassal, the gemstone crystals surrounding the Divine Sheep would surely assault her from all sides that very instant.

“H-however, it is disgraceful for a knight to stand before her foe and not attack—”

Justina, concerned for her honor at an odd juncture, made a low growl as if ready to go in slashing at the Beast Vassal any instant.

Nina, in the embrace of Kanon’s arms, attempted to counsel Justina.

“Calm yourself, Justina. It is the duty of a loyal knight to conceal thy heart under thy blade.”

“Lady Adelard...!”

Nina’s statement didn’t seem particularly grounded, yet for some reason, her words echoed deeply in Justina’s heart. “Nina,” Justina murmured as she readily sheathed her blade. The other woman watched and nodded with visible

satisfaction.

Nina, usually bored silly due to her immortal lifespan, watched a historical drama channel on cable TV from time to time. That's probably where she'd picked up her last statement.

"...All that said, the opponent seems raring to go. What will you do, Kanon? I cannot defeat it with my heavy metal particle cannon."

Nina set her thoughts back in order, glaring at the black Divine Sheep as she warned Kanon. Physical attacks barely affected Beast Vassals since they were amalgamations of demonic energy. It was a bad matchup even for an alchemist of Nina's caliber.

"It is all right."

Kanon set Nina upon the ground and touched the bracelet on her left wrist. That instant, a great quantity of spiritual energy surged out of her body.

Reacting to Kanon's spiritual essence, the black Divine Sheep roared. It fired black diamond crystals out like bullets, and they poured down on Kanon like a storm.

These crystals never touched her. A bulwark of dazzling spiritual essence manifested to protect her.

"The Svalinn System of the Royal Family of Aldegia...? But this spiritual power level is...!"

Nina exclaimed when she realized the true nature of the shield Kanon had deployed.

The Svalinn System was the ultimate defensive ritual of the Royal Family of Aldegia. In addition to interrupting physical attacks, it also completely nullified demonic energy. Normally, it couldn't be deployed without a battleship-class spiritual reactor, but Kanon was erecting it all on her own by using her body as a catalyst.

Pure white wings of light emerged from her back. The bracelet on her wrist emitted a pale glow as it projected a round, glowing shield. It was like something a Valkyrie would carry.

“...Faux-Angel... I see—so that bracelet has a mock spiritual pathway like the Lion King Agency’s spears?”

Nina murmured with a look of comprehension in her eyes.

Faux-Angel was a forbidden spell of the Aldegian Royal Family. It forced humans’ spiritual pathways to evolve, turning them into an angel while they were still alive. Normally, the ritual required one to consume the flesh of others and absorb their spiritual pathways. By using a powerful divine armament like Snowdrift Wolf as a substitute spiritual pathway, however, an effect similar to the Faux-Angel ritual could be achieved. Yukina Himeragi’s angelification had already proven this.

The so-called Shield of Skuld granted to Kanon no doubt had an effect similar to Snowdrift Wolf, which meant it could be used as a Faux-Angel catalyst.

“The ambient temperature is...!”

Justina shivered as she exclaimed in surprise. The temperature in the surrounding area had strangely plunged. Flakes of snow had begun to fall on the artificial isle of everlasting summer. Over the course of several seconds, that changed from light snow to an outright blizzard.

Powerful cold covered the artificial ground with frost as the water vapor in the atmosphere solidified into snow.

Kanon was the one responsible for the drop in temperature, her spiritual essence generating a field of intense cold around her.

“This is... *Fimbulvetr*...! Your Highness!”

Even for a member of the Royal Family of Aldegia, who specialized in magic of water and ice, this secret ritual was tricky to pull off. Justina stared dumbfounded as Kanon calmly pulled it off.

The black diamond Divine Sheep was completely enveloped in the world of intense cold Kanon had summoned. Even the gemstone crystals able to reflect any attack could not oppose an atmospheric phenomenon. The gemstones completely froze over, immobilized.

Even the creature’s attacks on Kanon were completely impeded by the

Svalinn System bulwark. Immobilized by pure white ice, all the black Divine Sheep could do was let out an angry cry.

“Kano... Incredible...”

Nagisa’s gaze was sparkling as she watched Kanon subdue an enormous Beast Vassal all by herself.

Yaze made a pained smile while glancing at the side of her face.

Really, the spell Kanon had activated was powerful enough to be considered a strategic weapon. It would have been normal to feel fear and anxiety over if and when such a power might be turned upon you instead. As if to illustrate this, Yaze couldn’t stop the cold sweat that had broken out over his back.

Nagisa, though, was able to simply admire her friend for being able to control such a dangerous power. *She’s a Demon Sanctuary resident through and through*, thought Yaze in quiet acceptance.

In another sense, it was only natural for Nagisa to be so audacious. She was Kojou Akatsuki’s little sister, after all.

“...!!”

Yaze still had that pained smile plastered on his lips when they suddenly twitched and shuddered slightly.

His super senses had detected an abnormality in Itogami Island’s sky.

This wasn’t the gate to Nod. It was below that. A new Beast Vassal had appeared in the air around a thousand meters above the container base.

It was a great sword with a blade spanning easily over a hundred meters—an Intelligent Weapon Beast Vassal.

“This is bad...!”

Yaze’s face contorted with fear.

It wasn’t that he’d forgotten it existed. He just hadn’t been able to think of a way to counter this Beast Vassal, no matter how hard he tried.

This was the hanging blade possessing the power of gravitational control, which represented a vampire’s physical might. It was power incarnate.

If that thing dropped to the ground, its sheer mass alone would tip Itogami Island over. Combined with using its gravity control ability to accelerate, he couldn't even conceive of the damage it would inflict.

Against that kind of mass, even Sayaka and Shio's ritual spell artillery attacks were mere drops in the bucket. Kanon's shield would also be ineffectual against it; even if her barrier held, the ground beneath her feet would give out before that.

"Asagi, can you stop that thing with The Cleansing—?!"

Yaze called out to Asagi, inside the tank, with a military radio he'd borrowed from Lydianne.

Her Cleansing was the only thing that stood a chance against that massive sword. Thanks to its ability to rewrite the laws of the world, it would be able to nullify even acceleration via gravity control. What coursed over the radio, though, was Asagi's angry, shrieking voice.

"Don't ask the impossible! I'm dedicating all my magical calculation resources to getting Kojou back to normal! There's no way I can take something that huge!"

"Gnhhh..."

Yaze grit his teeth as he realized Asagi was backed against a wall for once. She would never lie at a time like this. If she said she couldn't do it, she really couldn't.

If she gave up on turning Kojou back, she could probably fend off the sword Beast Vassal, but that would leave them unable to hold back the Beast Vassals on the surface. It would be wasting all the risks the girls had taken to slow the Beast Vassals down.

"—I believe it is now the turn of she who will be Kojou's lawful wife."

Just then, an elegant voice coursed over the radio, taking Yaze aback for an instant.

"That voice... You're...!"

"...Lawful wife?"

In contrast to Yaze, who was visibly shaken, Nagisa calmly poked at the statement.

Yaze continued gripping the radio as he looked overhead once again.

The enormous sword was fluttering down from the sky above. It looked distinctly larger than before. It was so ridiculously huge that the SDF helicopters flying through the sky seemed downright puny by comparison.

Nonetheless, the new silhouette roaring through Itogami Island's sky was no smaller than the giant sword itself. It was a military armored airship with a sleek hull.

The image of a Valkyrie wielding a blade was etched into that hull. It was the emblem of the Royal Family of Aldegia.

"I see we have made it in time for the show?"

On the bridge of the armored airship *Böðvildr*, an amused smile came over La Folia Rihavein's lips.

The news that the gate to Nod had opened in Itogami Island's sky had already spread across the globe. Quite a few nations were considering making any kind of excuse to intervene in the matter. The kingdom of Aldegia, noted for its high-end sorcerous industries, was one such nation.

The Pacific Ocean was international waters, so it was not difficult to dispatch a military force over it. The problem was justifying the intervention.

Officially, Itogami city-state was still in the throes of the civil conflict called the Electoral War. Even an allied nation like Aldegia could not lightly intrude upon Itogami Island. Now that the Dominions' primogenitors had joined the Electoral War, Aldegia could make enemies out of them with just one wrong move.

Despite these conditions, the nation had a single back door to the island.

This was the presence of Kanon Kanase. Her status as a member of the Aldegian Royal Family had been publicly announced right after the commemoration ceremony mere days prior. Moreover, she'd been granted Aldegian nationality since she was still a minor.

Other nations couldn't publicly criticize them for rescuing a member of the Royal Family from civil conflict on Itogami Island.

This was the pretext with which Aldegia had obtained permission to enter the island's airspace. They could claim they'd gotten involved in the conflict against their will. Such was the scenario La Folia had plotted out. Things had moved largely in accordance with her expectations.

She was getting reports from Justina, who she had sent on-site in advance. She had been surprised Kojou had relinquished the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, but in her mind, it was so very like him for that to not be the end of the matter.

He really was the only one who could toss La Folia, who was seeking renown as a master strategist, for a loop.

"Now things are getting interesting, aren't they?"

La Folia giggled in her tiny voice.

Strained smiles of resignation came over the faces of the crew around her. They were challenging a primogenitor-class Beast Vassal with only a single armored airship intended for troop transportation. This wouldn't usually be anything to be pleased about.

This might have annoyed them somewhat, but not a single face registered even a hint of fear. They didn't think they'd lose, not even to a huge Beast Vassal with power off the scale.

After all, the *Böðvildr* had La Folia aboard. She may have been a whimsical princess with a knack for causing trouble, but her overwhelming abilities inspired faith in her followers.

"Captain, launch the starboard Dromi. We shall nullify the Beast Vassal's gravity control. Bring us into Holy Protection Barrier range while maintaining distance from the target."

"Aye, ma'am—spiritual reactor, maximum output. Deploy triple-layered Holy Protection Barrier!"

The captain, whose weathered appearance made him look like a pirate, sent

detailed instructions toward the crew. The armored airship, exceeding a hundred and fifty meters from bow to stern, engaged in acrobatic maneuvers as it threaded through the sky and moved behind the Beast Vassal, firing huge anchors that wrapped around the enormous sword.

Pulled along by the Beast Vassal's mass, the hull creaked, with the helmsman just barely righting the ship without it breaking apart in midair as the demonic energy—nullifying Holy Protection Barrier sealed the foe's gravity control and thus its mobility.

As a result, the *Böðvildr* was being dragged and spun around the Beast Vassal to which it was attached via chains. The captain felt like a fisherman on a little boat taking on an enormous, extremely violent shark.

"Captain, how long can we hold in this state?"

The bridge was swaying in an unpleasant fashion, but La Folia inquired about this with a serene expression on her face.

"Even if the chains hold, the spiritual reactor can't maintain this output for more than ninety seconds."

The captain grimaced as he replied. The only reason they'd barely wrested the gigantic Intelligent Weapon under control was due to the *Böðvildr*'s vaunted Holy Protection Barrier. Yet if the spiritual reactor output raising the barrier to its limit dropped even slightly, the field would doubtlessly shatter.

They had to render that Beast Vassal dead in the sky before it came to that.

"Is that so? Then it would seem I must exert myself somewhat."

La Folia gently rose from the command chair.

"Please do not do anything overly rash, Princess."

The captain spoke in a casual tone of voice. He wasn't seriously thinking of stopping La Folia. He didn't think he needed to. It was just a greeting to calm nerves.

La Folia left the bridge and stepped out onto the armored airship's topside.

At an altitude of eight hundred meters above ground level, even La Folia wouldn't stand a chance if she fell, but the nighttime scenery beneath her was

quite a view.

The chain-snared sword Beast Vassal continued to try and thrash to free itself, but the *Böðvildr*'s barrier's interference kept it from moving. It wouldn't hold for even another minute, but that was plenty of time for La Folia.

She'd confirmed Kanon had used *Fimbulvetr* down on the ground. She'd expected Kanon to draw out the power of Faux-Angel when she'd sent the Shield of Skuld, but even she had never anticipated that Kanon would master the Royal Family's secret ritual on her own.

"That is Kanon for you. I cannot let her outdo me, now can I?"

La Folia smiled and gently closed her eyes. She began chanting a song of prayer to summon spirits into her own body.

"—Daughters of the gods that dwell in mine body, ye who select the dead to bring victory in the Age of the Sword!"

The spiritual energy flooding out from La Folia's entire body was of a vastness even greater than that of the angelicized Kanon.

Protecting her was the official reason for the kingdom of Aldegia intervening in the Electoral War. But that was really just a pretext for investigating Nod.

La Folia had yet another reason why she'd undertaken this—motives separate from that of the Royal Family of Aldegia.

She wanted to prove her kingdom's martial prowess to the entire world.

The revolt within Aldegia a few days prior had caused faith in the monarchy to plunge. Even though they'd forced the North Atlantic Empire to pay a great deal in compensation and the physical damage had been minimal, that had been nothing more than a diplomatic victory. They had needed to borrow the Fourth Primogenitor's aid to quell a disturbance within the kingdom—this was how Aldegia was being appraised on a military level.

Aldegia was a small country. It had defended its independence despite this because superiority in sorcerous manufacturing and military might had underpinned its international influence.

This was why La Folia needed to make a showing of Aldegia's might. She

couldn't have asked for a more perfect opponent to use the Royal Family's power against than a Beast Vassal of The Blood.

"The time of glimmering battle has come. By the command of the golden goddess, assemble. Open the gates to Fólkvangr—!"

The song La Folia chanted came to an end.

That instant there was a golden glow in the sky.

The next moment, spirits enveloped by light manifested around the airship. They resembled armed Valkyries. They numbered in the dozens—no, the hundreds.

Spirits only La Folia could summon using a spiritual reactor she'd brought to the physical realm. The spiritual essence the horde of Valkyries gave off was incomparably greater than that of any single Faux-Angel.

"Fire."

The instant La Folia's utterance met the sky, countless beams of light punched through the sword Beast Vassal.

A glow illuminated Itogami Island's night sky as if it was broad daylight. Its blade in tatters, the pitch-black giant sword was falling toward the sea.

"That princess is just ridiculous...!"

I knew that, though, thought Yaze as he sighed with an exasperated look.

All this time, he'd had a sneaking feeling Princess La Folia was keeping some kind of trump card under wraps. But in all honesty, he'd never expected something of this scale. The kingdom of Aldegia had traded blows with the Warlord's Empire on equal terms for centuries—evidently, its power wasn't to be taken lightly.

Regardless, La Folia's support had successfully neutralized the Beast Vassal that had concerned him the most. At present, they were succeeding in keeping the Beast Vassals on the ground contained. It was hard fighting on all fronts, but Asagi and company would soon arrive close to Kojou.

Come on—keep it up, thought Yaze, feeling like breaking out in prayer. It was then that Astarte, who had been assigned to him as a bodyguard, abruptly

opened her mouth.

“*Report. New Beast Vassal materialization confirmed. Hypothesized to be the second of The Blood’s familiars, Primus Glacies.*”

“What?!”

Realizing a new threat was descending from midair, Yaze felt his blood freeze.

It was a pitch-black Beast Vassal that resembled solidified darkness.

Its upper body was that of a human woman. And its lower body took the form of a beautiful fish. It had wings on its back and sharp talons like a bird of prey.

It was a mermaid. Or a Siren, perhaps?

Without warning, the Beast Vassal flung incredible cold about as it tried to trample Yaze and company, but...

“Self-defense invoked in accordance with the Homunculus Guardianship Act, Special Exception Number Two. *Execute, Rhododactylos.*”

Wings sprung forth from Astarte’s back to halt the pitch-black monstrous raptor.

Astarte’s gleaming, rainbow-colored wings then turned into giant arms, which wrapped around her body as it adopted humanlike form. Her humanoid Beast Vassal functioned as a transparent suit of living armor.

Aftershocks from the two Beast Vassals clashing sent Yaze and Nagisa flying, but they were not harmed, for Astarte’s Beast Vassal had shielded them.

“Miss Astarte?! Yaze, that’s...!”

“She’s an experimental homunculus with a Beast Vassal as a symbiote.”

Nagisa rose to her knee and opened her eyes wide in shock as Yaze calmly explained.

Beast Vassals were anomalies that could not normally exist in this world. Summoners had to sacrifice their own life energies to wield these creatures’ incredible destructive power while maintaining their physical forms.

It was said only unaging, undying vampires could employ Beast Vassals. Astarte was the sole exception.

“Symbiote... Wait, you can do that?”

Nagisa was still gaping as she asked him this. Yaze nodded with a pained expression.

“Yeah, but unlike a vampire with an infinite negative life force, Astarte has to whittle down her own life to supply it with demonic energy. Even right this second, she’s...”

It was around when he said this that Yaze gawked, for Nagisa had bit her lip and stood up, breaking into a run toward Astarte’s battle with the pitch-black monstrous raptor.

“—Er, hey, Nagisa!”

Going pale, Yaze chased after Nagisa and somehow managed to grab hold of her arm.

“What are you doing? Come back! You can’t do anything whether you catch up to her or not!”

“Let go, Yaze. It’s all right.”

Nagisa replied in an unexpectedly calm tone. Her arm was still trembling in his grip, however.

Nagisa suffered from demonophobia. It had markedly improved as of late, but the terror of being grievously wounded still ran deep inside her.

In fact, she was probably in physical pain just getting close to the two dueling Beast Vassals. As far as Yaze was concerned, she’d completely lost it.

Despite his objections, her expression was desperate as she shook her head.

Nagisa was afraid of demons, but she’d been fond of the homunculus Astarte since forever. Once upon a time, Astarte had been badly hurt trying to protect Nagisa. She felt indebted toward Astarte because of that. This was probably why she just couldn’t stand and watch the woman whittle her life away fighting the monstrous raptor.

“I may not be able to fight like Kano or Yukina, but I do know how to talk to Beast Vassals.”

Determination in her eyes, Nagisa glared at Yaze. Her confidence took him off guard. That momentary opening allowed her to sweep his hand aside and break into a run once more.

She slipped between the legs of Astarte's Beast Vassal and stood before the pitch-black raptor.

"Idiot! Come back!"

Yaze shouted angrily at Nagisa. He wanted to chase after her, but he couldn't get close. The cold the monstrous raptor was giving off was so overwhelming that just shouting threatened to freeze his vocal cords.

It was all he could do to use his control of the wind to keep Nagisa from freezing over.

"Primus Glacies..."

Nagisa called this out to the monstrous raptor. The powerful gusts of air tossed her hair to and fro. Then her hair clip fell off, and her locks danced up like a pair of wings.

The monstrous raptor did not cease its assault.

Cold so intense that even Yaze could not block it swirled all around Nagisa.

But she did not freeze. The powerful spiritual energy she'd been born with was keeping her safe.

She then emitted that spiritual energy toward the monstrous raptor.

It was like a girl offering seeds to a frightened little bird.

"That's your name, isn't it? Come here, Primus Glacies."

The black bird relented, then stared down at Nagisa.

Astarte's summoned Beast Vassal also went rigid, as if it, too, was a little confused.

Yaze froze and cleared his throat. It was then that he realized he could breathe once more. The frigid winds from the monstrous raptor had died down.

"That's crazy... There's no way..."

Yaze murmured this in a raspy voice. He didn't understand what was happening. A human speaking with a Beast Vassal was completely unprecedented.

Nagisa Akatsuki must have gained this ability back when she'd brought Avrora's soul into her body. Apparently, the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor who Avrora sealed had slumbered within the girl as well.

"A primogenitor-class Beast Vassal...tamed by a...human..."

Yaze shook his jumbled head. They'd lost their host. They weren't getting enough demonic energy. Other enemy primogenitors were present. The Blood's Beast Vassals had plenty of reasons to go on a rampage. He hadn't thought Nagisa's offering of spiritual energy would have been enough to calm them.

But the truth was that Nagisa had indeed stopped the rampage. She'd been possessed by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor for so long that perhaps she really had learned a way of communicating with them. Or perhaps there was some other explanation. It could have been pure chance, the kind of thing you'd call a *miracle*.

"There, there, good girl."

Nagisa smiled as she fondly called out to it like a little pet.

The image of the pitch-black bird dissolved before her very eyes.

The Beast Vassal had undone its own summons, returning to Kojou, its host.

Yaze stared at the impossible sight, dumbfounded to the very end.

3

Kojou remained pretty much at the center of the wide-open area in the container base in a low, crouched stance. In line with the grotesque monster he had transformed into, his movements were close to that of a wild beast's. The wills of the berserk Beast Vassals were probably dragging their host Kojou along for the ride.

Yukina and Shizuri were around thirty meters from Kojou. Compared to the

vast battlefield as a whole, they were practically touching him, yet even that brief distancing was proving difficult to close.

That was because there were three Beast Vassals barring the way, protecting their host from the two girls.

“—Hauras!”

Swinging her undulating, flame-like long sword, Shizuri struck back against the blazing manticore. This Beast Vassal, which embodied the drinking of blood, instantly robbed the demonic energy and life force of whatever it touched. It was a poor matchup for Hauras, a blade that increased in power the more it slashed its opponents to rob them of their demonic energy. The two abilities were counteracting each other, preventing the demonic sword from unleashing its full potential.

This was not the only reason Shizuri was having a hard time, however.

“Miss Kasugaya, your wounds!”

Shizuri wobbled after evading a blow from a Beast Vassal. Her swordplay was markedly less precise than usual. This was no surprise, as she was not in any condition to be fighting. In fact, she was so hurt it was a mystery how she could stand and walk by her own power. And yet...

“It does not hurt whatsoever!”

The girl in the white bunny suit firmly declared as she blinked away tears.

“Er, but...”

“I have the blessings of a paladin so I am completely fine! More importantly, your movements are growing dull, Yukina Himeragi!”

“Ghhh,” went Yukina, her words catching in her throat from Shizuri pointing out that painful fact. The outfit was really throwing her off. Naturally, high heels were out, so she was wearing sturdy boots far easier to move in with the bunny suit, but her exposed back and shoulders weighed heavily on her mind, preventing her from freely wielding her spear.

“I really...shouldn’t have put on this outfit...”

“I am just as embarrassed as you are!”

Shizuri angrily shouted this back with reddened cheeks. The two hands with which she gripped her sword were trembling.

“Curse you, Kojou...forcing even me to wear such an indecent outfit...”

“No, I...do not think senpai did anything of the sort...”

Yukina switched mental gears even as she pitied Kojou over the unjustified accusation, for she had noticed the new Beast Vassal pressing near above. It looked like a pitch-black Valkyrie. Its long sword was gleaming in the night sky, probably symbolizing a vampire’s cruelty and ferocity. It was not an opponent she could cross blades with while captive to her own shyness.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Yukina intercepted the sword the Valkyrie swung downward with her silver-colored spear. Even Snowdrift Wolf, which could nullify demonic energy, couldn’t take a square hit from this sword that could sever everything. The glimmer of the Divine Oscillation Effect further honed its thin, sharp blade as it deflected and somehow fended off the blow.

The slicing attack Yukina had just barely evaded bore deeply into the ground beside her, easily cutting down to the artificial isle’s foundation. She’d known it was strong, but the sheer might of this creature was unbelievable. The fact remained, however, that she couldn’t save Kojou unless she broke past this Beast Vassal.

“Awww, darn it! Stop running away, Kojou! Tanker, step on it!”

Asagi poked her upper body out of the tank’s hatch as she shouted, her irritation on full display. As dangerous as this seemed, the robot tank’s fiber-reinforced polymer armor would be blown away with one hit from a Beast Vassal anyway, so the result wouldn’t really change regardless.

Standing in front of Asagi and Lydianne was a pitch-black lion enveloped by bolts of electricity. This Beast Vassal governed a vampire’s ability to control lightning. Its attacks, literally flying at the speed of electricity, were much too fast for the tank to evade. This has forced them to hang back, leaving Asagi to grit her teeth as she looked in frustration at Kojou behind it.

“Lady Empress! Can thou not employeth The Cleansing...?!”

From the driver's seat, Lydianne looked back and asked Asagi this in the back seat.

"Itogami Island's internal network capacity is all a mess 'cause of that thing!"

Asagi growled and glared up at the gate to Nod floating overhead.

"On top of that, the amount of calculations needed to turn Kojou back is stupidly huge. I can only use The Cleansing once! So we can't miss no matter what!"

"Muuu... But at this rate...!" Lydianne moaned nervously.

Combat was taking a lot longer than their initial projections. Everyone was holding out well against The Blood's Beast Vassals, but it wouldn't be strange for them to eventually hit their limits the way things were going.

"And why the hell is Kojou running, anyway?! Wasn't he supposed to bite the moment he saw Himeragi and Kasugaya in bunny suits?! You said they were just the right thing for the job, Yaze, you dimwit—!!"

Asagi vented as she brushed her hair aside. "Ah-ha-ha," went Yuuma's lighthearted laugh as her blue-armored knight Guardian attended her from behind.

"Well, since you're chasing him, of course he's gonna run. Looks like Kojou's operating on pure instinct at the moment."

"I see."

Asagi found herself readily accepting Yuuma's carefree explanation. Whether it was true or not, the girl sounded awfully convincing.

"So what you need isn't to chase him but to make him want to chase you. It's the same with romance."

"Romance..."

Asagi openly grimaced as if she was swallowing a bitter pill. Chasing after love was not her field of expertise. If she were that smooth, she wouldn't have found herself in this mess to begin with.

Instead of getting past the Beast Vassals who were protecting him, they had

to make Kojou come to them. That seemed like the only way of breaking the stalemate, but she had no idea what to do now that Operation Bunny Girl had failed.

Maybe busting through by crook or by hook is the only way, brooded Asagi, but it was then that Yukina looked in her direction. Maybe she'd overheard her conversation with Yuuma, but for some reason, the oddly calm expression on her face made something stir in Asagi's chest.

"Aiba."

A faint smile came over Yukina. The glint of resolve in her serene eyes made Asagi's heart skip a beat.

"—Take care of...Akatsuki-senpai."

"Himeragi! No!!"

Asagi reflexively reached a hand toward Yukina, but it wasn't soon enough to stop her.

Yukina had turned the tip of the spear she held toward herself. Without any hesitation, she made a gash in her left wrist.

"Yukina Himeragi, what are you—?!"

Shizuri's voice trembled when she realized something was very wrong.

Fresh blood gushed out of the wound with unbelievable force to dye Yukina's fair skin vermilion. The pure white cuffs she wore turned a deep red. Raising the arm dripping fresh blood above her head, Yukina smiled at Kojou, taunting him.

The grotesque monster he had become seemed drawn to the blood-drenched girl and fixed his gaze on her. Kojou howled as his eyes glowed red. Then he gave into his cravings and attacked her.

"Le Bleu!"

Yuuma called out to her Guardian. The normally cheerful girl was in a fierce rage. This was the anger she harbored toward herself. Yukina had calmly wounded herself to save Kojou, while Yuuma had faltered. She couldn't forgive herself for that.

“I’ll take on the three Beast Vassals. You handle the rest!”

“Wha...?!”

That’s crazy, Asagi was about to shout, but Yuuma had leaped into a spatial distortion, leaving Asagi no time to stop her. Asagi bit her lip and shook her head. Yuuma had entrusted her feelings to her. Now Asagi had to change Kojou back. She was the only one who could.

“Go, Lady Empress! I shall lend mine aid to the Witch—!”

Lydianne shouted this toward Asagi.

“Please do!”

Asagi leaped down from the robot tank. Kojou, running on all fours, was already practically right on top of Yukina.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you go any farther. Allow me to demonstrate the ability of the Witch of Notaria.”

Yuuma appeared before the Beast Vassals trying to chase after Kojou. The ground at her feet changed color as countless written characters floated onto its surface. It was strange writing like you’d find in some kind of ancient text.

Irritated, the pitch-black lightning lion tried to mow Yuuma down with a foreleg. Yuuma, however, evaded the lightning-quick attack with ease. Her reaction far surpassed human limitations. She’d used temporal manipulation to increase her own speed, an ability she’d gained from the grimoire of Kako Magatoki, Witch of the Dusk.

“Monad has no window; it is only a symbol—!”

Yuuma continued and summoned power from yet another grimoire.

Before Yuuma was the pitch-black Valkyrie wielding a sword, yet even her blade, which could rend anything apart, was unable to so much as touch Yuuma. This was thanks to the *Probability Adjustment* grimoire held by the Meyer Sisters, aka the Ashdown Witches.

Yuuma had inherited her mother’s ability to perfectly reproduce a magical grimoire from memory. She also possessed the ability to control space like Natsuki Minamiya. Leveraging the full potential of both abilities, Yuuma could

punch far above her weight, even against Beast Vassals leagues more powerful than she was.

“Ha-ha, verily you are doing well, Lady Witch of the Blue!”

Rushing over to assist, Lydianne loudly extolled Yuuma’s combat exploits. Somewhere along the line, the new model robot tank Momiji she was driving had changed form, revealing the proper weaponry it had kept hidden. On its back was a pair of Vertical Launching System missiles with eight tubes apiece, and in the center of its torso was a giant gun barrel with a crimson lens embedded within.

“Then I shalt also use the cards I hath kept up my sleeve.”

The missiles launched in a single volley of sixteen and poured down on the pitch-black manticore like a meteorite shower. The Beast Vassal, supposedly immune to physical attacks, let out an anguished cry from the impact.

The crimson, large-caliber laser cannon then mowed down all three of the Beast Vassals.

Tactical missiles able to inflict damage upon Beast Vassals and the large-caliber laser dubbed the Flame-Spitting Spear—both were identical to a Nalakuvera’s weapons. Lydianne and Asagi had outfitted their own robot tank with these weapons after analyzing the Nalakuvera unearthed on New Itogami Island.

Witnessing the girls’ power, the three Beast Vassals recognized Yuuma and Lydianne as enemies they needed to eliminate. Consequently, they left their host isolated.

—This was their first, last, and greatest chance to save the monsterized Kojou.

Kojou, clad in a jet-black exoskeleton, attacked with his sharp fangs bared.

Yukina was not afraid of his outward appearance. She merely regretted that she had been powerless to stop him from changing into that form in the first place.

The wound on her wrist felt hot. She’d painstakingly avoided cutting tendons to not impede her fighting after the fact, but she might have lost too much

blood regardless.

That had been her only option. As a powerless little girl, she couldn't think of anything else she could offer for his sake except her own life.

Yukina had advanced too far along the path of angelification to fight like Shizuri any longer. If she used Snowdrift Wolf for much longer, the chances ran high that she would fade away. That was why Yukina had no other choice. It was her duty to bleed for his sake.

Her vision was growing darker. Strength was draining from her body. She couldn't evade Kojou's fangs.

I do not mind, thought Yukina. Even if she fell here, Asagi and the others would save Kojou.

"I regret to inform you—"

There was a sudden, heavy *clang* as fresh blood marred her cheeks.

The blood had not flowed from Yukina. Shizuri had stood in her white bunny suit to shield her fallen comrade. Kojou had sunk his fangs deep into the paladin's arm.

"I cannot allow her to lose any more blood. You will have to make do with mine."

Kojou tried to tear Shizuri's arm off, but her resilient ogress body stood strong against him. Unable to remove his fangs, Kojou now found himself immobilized.

"Asagi Aiba! Now!!"

"Roger that!"

Asagi leaped at Kojou from behind, wrapping both her arms around his neck. This was more commonly known as a sleeper-hold, a finishing move straight out of mixed martial arts.

"I've got you, Kojou. No way you're getting away at this range! Kikimora! The Cleansing!!"

Asagi angrily shouted toward the misshapen avatar hovering on the screen of the smartphone she gripped. The scarlet glow radiating from Asagi sank into the

gaps in Kojou's exoskeleton.

A dazzling beam of light burst forth, forcing Shizuri to shut her eyes. Kojou writhed in anguish, but Asagi didn't care as she kept wringing his neck.

"This pain is Himeragi's gift to you."

A wicked, angry smile came over Asagi as she whispered into Kojou's ear.

The Cleansing was able to freely rewrite the world, but controlling it was a frighteningly delicate and difficult affair. It took the giant sorcerous device called Itogami Island, the vast magical energy via the dragon lines, magical calculations only Asagi, the Priestess of Cain, could perform, and pushing the supercomputers to their utmost to pull it off. Doing all that made it possible to activate, but there was still one element missing: namely a true wielder of The Cleansing—a magic user able to take the image from the magical calculations and will it into being.

At its most basic, magic was the act of using magical energy to make the real world reflect the image in your own mind. Since she wasn't a magic user, Asagi could send The Cleansing into the right direction, but she wasn't able to control an image with the precision necessary to completely reproduce a single person. That was why Asagi needed a real magic user to actually control The Cleansing with her support.

Mind you, that didn't mean just any magic user would do. The caster needed to be someone with a complete knowledge of Kojou Akatsuki's proper form to accurately reproduce it. Of course, no such convenient caster existed.

None save the Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency who served as Kojou Akatsuki's watcher—

"My power alone isn't enough to turn you back to how you were. That's why I asked Himeragi to control the magic so she can turn Monster Kojou back to her image of Fourth Primogenitor Kojou!"

"Hime...ragi..."

The grotesque monster let out a murmur in response to Asagi's words.

The exoskeleton wrapped around his entire body had formed tiny cracks.

These spread into splits and fissures. The thick armor-like hide crumbled and fell away.

Out from within appeared the familiar sight of a certain boy—an ordinary vampire with a vaguely languid expression on his face.

“Cas... Asagi...”

Pulling back his fangs from Shizuri’s arm, he glanced at Asagi, embracing him from behind, with a mystified look. Realizing then that Yukina had fallen at his feet, he audibly drew in his breath.

“Himeragi...”

A pained, bewildered expression came over Kojou as he saw Yukina covered in blood, but this soon changed to one of relief. Yukina might have been hurt, her face pale from blood loss, but she was smiling despite it all.

Offering his hand, Kojou gently pulled Yukina’s little body up into his embrace. Yukina gently whispered as she moved her hands around his back.

“Welcome back, senpai.”





OUTRO

OUTRO

Shahryar Ren, president of Magna Ataraxia Research, leisurely descended a flight of stairs in an enormous ruin. He was completely surrounded by darkness, yet he showed no sign of being inconvenienced.

In the dark, his eyes glowed red like some kind of nocturnal predator, and his pale skin made him seem like one of the walking dead.

“We are still unaware of Dodekatos’s...no, the Fourth Primogenitor’s whereabouts?”

Ren inquired about this with a businesslike tone toward the subordinate following behind him.

The MAR special forces commander wearing steel-colored camouflaged fatigues seemed fairly tense as he shook his head. The combat squad President Ren had ordered into Nod consisted of around four hundred soldiers. At present, nearly half were conducting an investigation inside the ruins to determine the location of the vampire called Dodekatos.

“At present, there is no report she has been located. All units of the Second Armed Reconnaissance Battalion are continuing the search.”

“Hmm. What do you think, Kreyd?”

Ren nodded vaguely and shifted the conversation to the other person behind him.

Standing there was a man of great stature wearing a lizard skull mask over his face, the Flame Dragon who was the sole survivor of the Order of the End.

“...It is likely the work of Glenda.”

His vocal chords bore little resemblance to a human being’s, so the Flame Dragon replied in a guttural voice difficult to make out.

The previously emotionless Ren faintly scowled as he glared at Kreyd.

“The dragon with a steel-colored mane... Just who is she?”

“I have heard she is...Cain’s familiar... Even I know...no more.”

“I see. I suppose this should have been expected of the Guardian of Cain’s Legacy. At the very least, she is likely far better versed in the layout of Senra than we. Small wonder we have not found her, search as we might.”

Ren coldly smiled. The artificial isle of Senra floating in the Great Sea of Nod, the landmass upon which Itogami Island was said to be based, was still enormous even in its ruined state.

If Glenda truly had lived in the same era as Cain, it was quite likely she knew every nook and corner of the city like the back of her hand. That would make sheltering Dodekatos out of their sight an easy task.

The real issue was that he did not know Glenda’s objective. Even if the dragon was following Cain’s last wishes, he didn’t think this constituted a reason to shield Dodekatos. After all, Dodekatos was currently the Fourth Primogenitor—the very culprit in the murder of Cain the Sinful God.

“What will you...do?”

Kreyd asked this in a low voice. As a fellow dragon, Glenda’s association with Cain must have felt deeply disturbing.

“We will continue the search. There is no reason to be hasty. Her free will has been frozen. She poses no threat to us.”

Ren touched the dagger in his pocket. This dagger, inherited from the Devas, was a sorcerous device for controlling the Kaleid Blood series. Although there had been no guarantee the device would have worked on Kojou Akatsuki, a former human being, the fact that he’d mysteriously handed his Beast Vassals to Dodekatos had resulted in Ren’s plan advancing much more smoothly.

“In any case, Dodekatos’s role has come to an end. We have any number of replacements for her.”

Arriving at the bottom of the stairs, Ren touched the control panel standing before him.

That instant, the interior lighting of the building thought to be a ruin came on.

They were at the lowest stratum of the huge structure at the very center of the artificial isle Seram known as the Goplam. Though it had lain in ruin for centuries—no, millennia—this section remained active.

“This is...the true Legacy of Cain...?”

Looking around the underground chamber illuminated by those lights, Kreyd let out a muffled growl.

The special forces commander was at a loss for words.

It was a giant cylindrical space like a gargantuan missile silo. Its walls were completely covered with rows of translucent crystals resembling gemstones.

The horde of beautiful crystals, which changed color with the angle of the light, made each seem like part of a giant work of art or reflections from an assembly of mirrors, almost like an amusing device that displayed beautiful patterns—a kaleidoscope.

“Yes. This is the ultimate sorcerous weapon Cain sealed at the cost of his own life, an abominable, dark legacy capable of burning the world to cinders, and the accursed power I should be the one to inherit—Beast Vassals.”

Approaching one of the crystals, Ren stroked its surface like it was an old friend.

Hovering inside the translucent crystal, sleeping with her blazing blue eyes open, was a beautiful girl.



The twelve pitch-black Beast Vassals vanished from sight the instant Kojou returned to his human form. They had not completely dissipated by any means but had recognized him as their new host and master and had gone back into his blood.

“...Why’d they suddenly decide to do what I tell ’em?”

Kojou asked this while putting on a fresh school uniform Nina had whipped up with alchemy in place of the one in tatters from his turning into a monster. He was in a field clinic tent placed close to the container base. Yaze had arranged its placement with the Island Guard beforehand.

There were a number of other similar tents in the surrounding area, plus Gigafloat Management Corporation employees and harbor-related staff running around in a big hurry. It seemed they had to begin repairing the facilities destroyed by the Beast Vassals' rampage that very night. Kojou felt pretty apologetic due to his substantial responsibility in the matter.

"It's because you drank Kasugaya's blood."

Asagi bluntly replied with this while violently operating her laptop PC.

She was hurrying to get the damaged harbor back on its feet as much as anyone. She apparently had to work for free for a while to make up for monopolizing Itogami Island's network in preparation for The Cleansing. Kojou felt even worse when he'd heard that part.

"Cas's blood...er, wait, just from that?"

Kojou cocked his head while putting a hand over his mouth. Even if he had halfway lost his sanity, the fact remained he'd bitten deep into Shizuri's arm and drank her blood.

When told that unlike normal vampiric acts, there might be a scar from it, Shizuri had replied with a laugh, saying, "I do not particularly mind." Immediately after, though, she added, "So long as you properly take responsibility," sticking her tongue out toward Kojou in a suggestive way that was pretty terrifying.

Either way, he didn't think her blood alone had all the demonic energy twelve Beast Vassals craved.

Kojou's dubious expression conveyed this message when Asagi said, "Here," tossing her own smartphone toward him. Its screen displayed the Electoral War rankings app.

"Congratulations, Vampire K. A. (age seventeen), resident of Island South."

"...Huh?"

Kojou scrolled down the screen, clueless as to what she meant by "congratulations." At the top of the rankings was a face shot of a boy who didn't seem particularly photogenic. There was a mosaic blocking his eyes, but

Kojou would never mistake the person's identity.

“—Wait, this is me?!”

“Hey, I gave you a pseudonym. People probably won't even realize it's you.”

“Like hell they won't?! Wait, how did I become number one in the Electoral War?! On top of that, I'm like three digits ahead of second place, so it's a runaway victory or something?! The heck happened to the other primogenitors?!”

Kojou shouted in a shrill voice as his hand holding the smartphone trembled. He had no idea what had happened to bring this about in the mere half a day he'd been out of it.

“The First Primogenitor wasn't participating in the Electoral War to begin with. From the beginning, the Warlord's Empire was subordinate to the Tensou Academy Domain.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Asagi's explanation made him remember that for himself. He didn't know what that man had been thinking, but he hadn't tried to be Itogami Island's ruler from the very start. For some reason, he'd snuck into Tensou Academy over in Island West and supported Yume as one of her subjects. The primary schooler Yume ought to have been number one in the ruler rankings as a result.

“Second place in the ruler rankings is Island North after Natsuki put under her thumb. When you add the Second Primogenitor in East and the Third Primogenitor in South, it gets you close to ninety percent of Itogami Island's total subjects.”

“I see.”

“So we had all of them become Kasugaya's subjects.”

“...Huh?”

Kojou said this back, dumbfounded. He could understand Yume and Natsuki cooperating with Shizuri. As her subject, the First Primogenitor couldn't go against whatever Yume decided, so that made sense at least. He didn't think getting the Second and Third Primogenitors to agree to obey Shizuri was any

simple task at all.

Asagi, though, shook her head like this was no big deal.

“Giada was cooperative from the start, and the Second Primogenitor responded to negotiations. Miss Haba needed some good stomach medicine thanks to that, though.”

“Stomach medicine...?”

He didn’t really get it, but he felt he had a general grasp of things. No doubt Asagi had put the super-serious Yui through the wringer, shoving some sort of extremely difficult dilemma onto her.

Kojou naturally gave Asagi a reproachful look for this. Asagi looked back at him, exhaling with a twinge of dismay.

“So, Kojou, when you drank Kasugaya’s blood and turned her into your Blood Vassal, you became the victor of the Electoral War. You remember what the victor gets as a special commemorative prize, right?”

“...The demonic energy of the subjects...!”

Kojou shuddered, feeling goose bumps all over his skin.

Via their demon registration bracelets, the rulers participating in the Electoral War were able to draw a portion of the demonic energy of their subjects. If he had the demonic energy of every demon living on Itogami Island, maybe it was enough to sate the appetites of The Blood’s twelve Beast Vassals.

“That’s how it is,” said Asagi with a smile. “Right now, you’re ruler of Itogami Island in name and fact. Your Beast Vassals are being supported by the entire population of Itogami Island. Don’t forget that, Mr. K. A.”

“Beware of The Blood.”

“Protect the white-haired girl, would you?”

Yukina suddenly remembered the words spoken to them by La Folia’s twin little sisters just before they left the kingdom of Aldegia. It was because of Shizuri the ogress that they had been able to halt the rampage of The Blood’s Beast Vassals.

If she hadn't become ruler of Saikai Academy to protect it out of her personal sense of justice, they probably couldn't have been saved—not Yukina and the others, not the island.

Ki Juranbarada's actions remained a mystery as well.

For some reason, he had acted as Yume's subject from the beginning, making no move to become ruler himself. That was why Yukina and the others had been able to get his people to become Kojou's subjects without any resistance. Thanks to a pot of curry, they'd conciliated with the Second Primogenitor without any kind of troublesome deal.

Perhaps his choosing Yume as his ruler was insurance just in case? Had Shizuri not become a ruler, the role of having Kojou drink one's blood would probably have fallen to Yume instead.

If so, he'd set the entire thing up from the beginning.

All to make the boy named Kojou Akatsuki the true ruler of Itogami Island—

"Truly, you were reckless."

The black cat sighed heartily in exasperation as she watched the blood-ridden Yukina being carried into the medical tent.

Naturally, Sayaka was completely pale as she tearfully cried out. Yui and Shio ended up dragging her out of the tent by force so that she wouldn't get in the way of Yukina's treatment.

Are you an idiot? said the single scornful glance Kiriha gave Yukina, after which she scribbled something onto the bandage wrapped around Yukina's wrist and left. Yukina thought it best to pretend not to notice the healing charm on the underside of the bandage differing from those utilized by the Lion King Agency.

Yukina only heard after the fact that it was actually Nagisa who'd treated her while she was unconscious from blood loss. Yukari was apparently shocked by the ritual, so high-level that one would never think it was done by a complete amateur like Nagisa. Thanks to that, Yukina could already move her left hand without any difficulty. There was barely even a scar, which made her feel a little apologetic given the heavy injuries the other girls had sustained.

Yuuma had apparently headed on back early, figuring Kojou would chew her ear off when she got busted for bringing Nagisa to such a dangerous battlefield. Yukina could only admire how well she understood Kojou's sister's complex personality.

Natsuki and Yaze were apparently occupied with a secret meeting with La Folia, who'd touched down by that point. Yukina was a little uneasy about that, but there was nothing she could do. She could only pray she would not become wrapped up in the girl's schemes.

Yume and Didier were sound asleep from fatigue in the next tent over from Yukina. She was hardly surprised a pair of primary schoolers had difficulty remaining up at that late hour.

And then...

"...Himeragi, are you awake?"

Yukina hastily tried to sit up when she saw it was Kojou who'd come to check on her.

"Hey, lie down already."

"No, the wounds themselves are quite minor..."

Yukina looked up at Kojou's awkward show of consideration and broke into tiny laughter.

"What?"

"Er, I mean, how is the state of your body? It was supposed to have completely returned to how it was, but is anything different from before?"

Yukina gazed intently at the bewildered Kojou, checking on that with a serious look on her face.

On the outside, the current Kojou did not differ from the Kojou whom Yukina knew in any way. According to simulations using Asagi's magical calculations, even the parts Yukina couldn't see ought to have been faithfully reproduced down to minute details. It didn't look like his personality had changed, but perhaps something felt off that only the boy himself could detect.

"Ahhh, that. I heard from Asagi. You're the one who turned me back, right,

Himeragi?”

Kojou stroked his own cheek and head as he tried to wrap his head around the whole thing.

“I can’t really tell there’s anything like that, so who knows. What do you think, Himeragi?”

“I think it is quite a shame since you were more attractive as a human being.”

Yukina commented on this in a subdued voice. Judging from Minami Shindou and Shio’s reactions when they’d met him at Saikai Academy, Kojou apparently had more animal magnetism with the girls before he turned into a vampire.

When Kojou heard Yukina’s words, he was shaken far more than she’d expected.

“You’re serious...”

“Ah, I’m joking. It is a joke.”

Kojou was so crestfallen that Yukina hurried to follow up.

As a matter of fact, Yukina felt closer to the current Kojou than to the Kojou who was bright and cheerful in the morning. For some reason, she could feel comfortable being right beside him, and it would be inconvenient for her to have even more girls getting closer to him.

“I am very sorry. This was all because I was unable to stop Miss Zana from—”

When Yukina saw Kojou had somehow managed to recover, she formally bowed her head. Yukina’s carelessness had been the cause of both Zana’s kiss and her stabbing him with a knife.

Kojou, though, seemed a little beside himself as he shook his head.

“Hey, Himeragi, that’s not your fault any way you slice it. I’m the one who took the First Primogenitor up on his offer.”

“That...might well be the case, but...”

Yukina awkwardly hesitated with her words. Yes, Kojou really had gone along with Ki’s deal. He wanted the power with which to bring Aurora back from Shahryar Ren.

Indeed, he'd gained it. Even if they were incomplete prototypes, he'd gained power rivaling that of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals.

"Guess technically he made good on his promise?"

Kojou commented on this as he stared at his own palms.

Yes, he'd obtained power, but this was no more than the end of the beginning. He'd wanted the power for the sake of rescuing a single girl.

Without a word, Kojou looked up in the direction of Nod, floating up there in the sky.

As he did so, Yukina spoke.

"Senpai. Would you drink my blood?"

"...Huh?"

Dumbstruck, Kojou opened his eyes wide as he looked back at Yukina.

"Er, um," went Yukina, nervously raising both hands.

"If I do not become senpai's Blood Serv— Vassal, I cannot use Snowdrift Wolf..."

"Er, I can't, though. Himeragi, didn't you just faint from losing too much blood?"

Kojou cited a most sensible reason as he declined Yukina's wish, but she would not back down. She was worried that if she didn't return to being Kojou's Blood Vassal while she could, he might leave her behind when he went off to Nod.

"It will be all right if it's only a little. I received treatment from Nagisa, too, after all."

"All that did was close the wound. It didn't put any blood back into you. Plus, I guess I don't need any more tonight?"

"...Excuse me?"

Kojou's offhanded slip of the tongue made Yukina's eyes run cold. By not needing any, he probably meant he'd already had his fill, yet so far as Yukina knew, Kojou should only have drunk from Shizuri that night and only a little

from her arm at that.

“Senpai, surely you are not saying you drank blood from someone else during the time I was asleep...?!”

“Ah...er, well that couldn’t be helped. They said I had to form a spiritual pathway between me an’ Astarte so her life span wouldn’t get whittled down just from having that Beast Vassal in her, and that Kanase was in danger of fading away ’cause she’d used the Faux-Angel ritual and stuff so...”

Kojou readily confessed, figuring she’d find out whether he tried to hide it or not.

Now she understood. Certainly, one could fairly say such situations made it unavoidable. However, as his watcher, Yukina was unable to go, *Ah, is that so?* and accept it just like that.

“If it was only Miss Astarte, that would be one thing, but Kano even...!”

“Come to think of it, there was something I kinda wanted to ask you, too, Himeragi...”

“Do not change the subject!”

Yukina glared at Kojou with raised eyebrows. However, Kojou looked back at Yukina with a serious expression. It seemed something was genuinely bugging him.

“Why are you...dressed up like a bunny girl?”

“Bu...!!”

Yukina’s face froze in mid-exclamation.

After a long, silent gap, her eyes fell down to her own outfit. Only the white cuff on her right wrist remained. Her bodysuit left her chest and shoulders heavily exposed and made the modest cleavage of her breasts and her body lines very distinct to the eye—

“Y-you are mistaken, Akatsuki-senpai! This was for the purpose of seducing you...”

“Seducing...me?”

Kojou blinked hard.

“Senpai, you are mistaken. I mean, this was all for getting you to drink Miss Kasugaya’s blood when you were berserk. Yaze said Akatsuki-senpai would definitely fall for it; that is why... Anyway, you are mistaken—!”

Yukina’s teary-eyed shout echoed through the Demon Sanctuary’s night sky.

The sky continued to a foreign land.

A land where an inverted, steel-colored city floated in the sky, quietly looking down at the surface as the true terror within remained asleep—



Afterword

I am very sorry to keep you waiting so long...!

Strike the Blood, Volume 21, has finally hit stores.

As this series reaches its grand finale, this volume finally reveals the series' greatest mysteries. Who were the Devas? What is Nod? What happened between Cain and the Fourth Primogenitor? What are vampires, primogenitors, Beast Vassals? I was a bit anxious about portraying the parts I've stretched out and put off up to this point, but setting that aside, I hope you enjoyed it.

On the other hand, I feel like this novel allowed me to give an inside look at what makes the heroines tick in a way I hadn't been able to portray much to date. The girls had a lot of scenes. This goes hand in hand with the concept, but it was a lot of fun portraying the heroines interacting with one another in ways that wouldn't happen under normal circumstances. You're free to imagine what Yuiri went through when eating that curry, along with all sorts of trouble the others got into! I'd always wanted to write a Kojou rescue mission from the perspectives of other characters.

Now, I'd better talk about the anime version. You probably already know this, but following the third season that finished A-OK in September of last year, it's been decided that a fourth OVA season will go on sale. Whoaaaaa—thank you very much! This is thanks to all your support!

Also, the *Strike the Blood Special OVA: The Disappearing Holy Lance* will hit stores shortly before season four airs. The details are on the anime website, so I'd be very pleased if you checked it out.

To Manyako-sama the illustrator, thank you very much this time around. The cover illustration for this volume is really, really splendid. I was so moved when I saw the rough draft, that I squealed in admiration despite myself. Thank you

so very much!

To everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, I have the utmost gratitude to all of you who've read this title.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

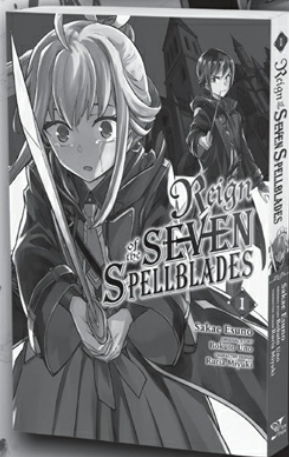
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